11.5

Saekisan

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Hanekoto

The Angel Next Door Fan TL Release

The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten
Fan Translation
Saekisan
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Hanekoto

Amane Fujimiya
This photo of them cooking together in harmony reminded Koyuki once again that Mahiru had found the partner she had always dreamed of.
Mahiru Shiina

“Can we keep going...
just a little more?”
“...I do believe...
there’s such a thing
as....*restraint*.”

Anime V1 Blu-ray Visual

(@Hanekoto2424)

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Otonari no Tenshi-sama ni Itsunomanika Dame Ningen ni Sareteita Ken

NextDoorTL: Vol. 11.5 Fan Translation

Translators:
Indi, Zel

Proofreaders:
SoTipsyy, KBlade, Strata

Editors:
Indi

Raws:
aritakun, Trevor, JHgamer, Indi, Dil

Accuracy Checkers:
Zel

Workflow Automation:
SPACEBAR, Granger, Kine

Graphics: Indi

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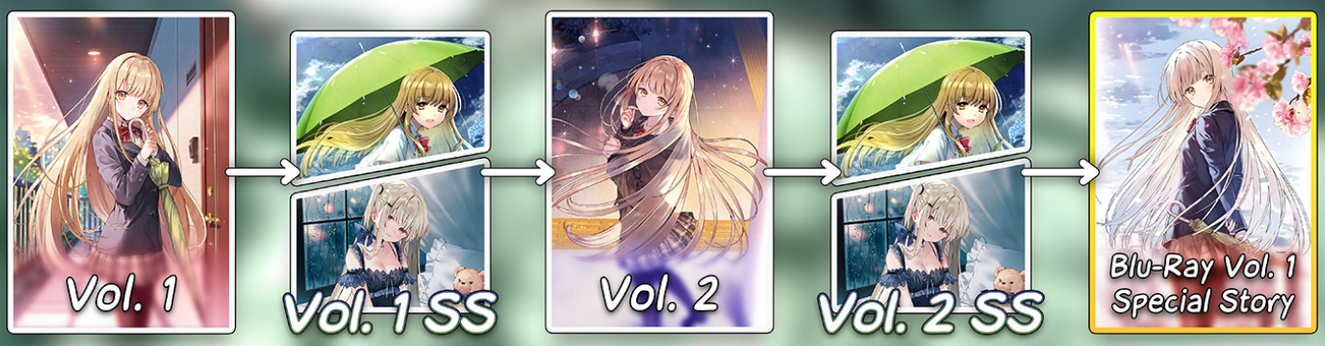
With love, Indi

Series Reading Order



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Amane Fujimiya

A second-year high school student who lives next door to his girlfriend, Mahiru. Always dedicated and considerate, he supports his girlfriend however he can. The world's number one fan of eggs.

Mahiru Shiina

A second-year high school student who lives next door to her boyfriend, Amane. A devoted, diligent, and sweet girl who wants to give Koyuki an album full of candid photos to put her worries to rest.

The Angel Next Door Fan TL Release

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Afterword: Author's Message

It All Began with a Single Request

Ever since her birthday, Mahiru had gotten into the habit of calling Koyuki on a fairly regular basis.

Before that, she only sent a letter about twice a year—just enough to let Koyuki know how she was doing. She'd always worried that reaching out too often might bother her. After all, they had originally been nothing more than a housekeeper and the girl she looked after. But then Koyuki had looked at her with those warm, gentle eyes and said, *"I've never once thought of you as a bother. Let me hear your voice every now and then."* And just like that, their conversations began again.

Even so, the most they ever called was once every one or two months. Anything more than that felt like taking advantage of Koyuki's kindness. For Mahiru, just hearing her voice at all was enough to make her heart settle. She never dared to ask for more.

So when a quiet weekend finally lined up with Koyuki's schedule, Mahiru kept her day clear. After about a month had passed since their last conversation, they reunited with each other over a video call.

"It's been a while," Mahiru greeted.

"Hehe, it really has, hasn't it? Though in the grand scheme of things, I suppose it hasn't been that long," Koyuki said cheerfully, her gentle, elegant smile filling the screen as she gazed at Mahiru. *"I'm glad to see you're in good health. Have you been keeping well, Mahiru-san?"*

"Yes. Um, nothing particularly eventful happened, so I…don't have much to report, sadly." Mahiru said, looking a little apologetic.

"Oh dear, there's no need to sound so stiff," Koyuki chuckled softly. *"Tell me anything you feel like sharing, and keep to yourself anything you'd rather*

not. No changes means you live a life full of peace."

"…Thank you."

"What are you thanking me for? I told you—I want to hear your voice. There's no need to be shy."

Her smile never wavered, warm and steady through the screen.

Mahiru had always believed that Koyuki's kindness was one of her most admirable qualities—something she herself hoped to grow into. This time, instead of trying to explain it, she simply let her smile relax. What Mahiru saw as a profound, heartfelt kindness was, to Koyuki, something so natural she didn't even think of it as special at all.

"Have you done anything fun lately?" Koyuki asked.

"I forgot to tell you last time, but I had a Christmas party. With Amane-kun and our friends."

Mahiru searched for a pleasant topic that wouldn't weigh the conversation down, and remembered she had never told Koyuki about Christmas.

The year before, she had spent a quiet, modest holiday with Amane. But this most recent Christmas had been different. Amane was now her boyfriend, and she had grown close with Itsuki and his circle as well. Compared to the last one—compared to any Christmas she had ever known—this year's celebration was far more exhilarating.

"Oh my, isn't that wonderful? I recall you once told me that you wished to have a Christmas party with all your friends, didn't you?"

Mahiru smiled wryly at the memories Koyuki's words stirred up. She *did* remember saying that. It had been one of her childhood dreams.

But back then, she had neither friends close enough to invite nor the freedom to bring anyone into her home. Of course, as a child, she couldn't invite people over without permission, but truthfully, it wasn't a house she could casually invite people to in the first place. It was far too big, far too empty for a girl who lived there mostly alone.

She wanted to keep her circumstances a secret from everyone else. Even Koyuki, her acting guardian, couldn't smile at the idea. In the end, a Christmas party remained nothing more than a dream out of reach. There were times when Mahiru genuinely believed it was something she might go

her whole life without experiencing. But as it turned out, life had more surprises in store for her than she could have ever expected.

"I couldn't really host a party without any adults around. And…people might've thought I was bragging about the house I lived in, so that was another reason I couldn't."

"That was never your fault, Mahiru-san. Protecting yourself is important. It's better not to invite needless envy," Koyuki replied softly. *"…But one of your dreams finally came true, didn't it?"*

"Yes, it did. And also, um…I got a present from Amane-kun's parents."

Koyuki had never been one to give Mahiru gifts. Mahiru had always felt her affection, but they were bound by roles and circumstances. Gifts simply weren't something Koyuki could offer her.

And Mahiru never felt sad about that.

Once she was old enough to understand, she knew it wasn't Koyuki's place to buy her presents. Instead, on her birthday, on Halloween, on Christmas, Koyuki would prepare a special meal. That was how she celebrated. Mahiru had always known that was her way of saying she cared.

She knew she had been cherished and loved in her own way.

Even so, deep inside, Mahiru always had a small, childish wish:

I want a present from Santa.

She wished for it even while knowing it would never happen.

And even after she learned that Santa wasn't real, that parents were the ones who placed the gifts beneath the tree, that tiny wish lingered in a corner of her heart.

And then, at last, it was granted.

Not by her biological parents, but by her lover's parents—people connected to her by heart.

"You've met Fujimiya-san's parents?" Koyuki blinked in mild surprise. Mahiru then realized that although she'd told Koyuki she was dating Amane, she had never mentioned how close she'd become with his family.

"Yes. They've visited us here several times, and I've also…um, stayed at Amane-kun's family home with him."

"Hehe, so you've already made your introductions. It sounds like you get along well with his parents too. It seems I truly have nothing to worry about."

“Yes. There’s no concern at all. His parents are so much like Amane-kun, and they’ve been incredibly kind to me…”

“If they’re anything like him, then there’s no reason to be afraid. His face and his actions made it clear how dearly he loves you.”

“…Yes.”

The moment Koyuki said it, Mahiru’s face grew warm, and her eyes then dropped to the floor. Embarrassing as it was, she couldn’t deny a single word. She was the one who felt Amane’s love more clearly than anyone.

Even if it embarrassed her to admit it aloud, Mahiru knew everything about Amane betrayed his love for her. His voice, his eyes, the way he smiled, the atmosphere around him, the way he moved—every part of him said it was only natural for him to love her.

She never could have imagined, on the day they first met, that he would become so open and straightforward with his affection. And yet, from the very beginning, he had always been honest—never offering empty flattery. In a way, perhaps it was only natural that he grew into someone who could love so transparently.

And Koyuki could tell as well. Her voice came warm through the speaker. *“Men that pure-hearted and devoted are rare these days.”*

“Amane-kun…um, he treasures me more than anyone. He shows me with his whole heart how much he loves me, so there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“I was never worried to begin with, you know? Anyone who pays attention can see how earnest he is. His resolve to settle down is clear as day.”

“Wh–what!?”

That startled cry slipped out of Mahiru’s mouth. Never—not even in her wildest imagination—had she expected Koyuki to phrase it like that. *Settle down*. In other words, marriage.

Amane had never said the word outright, but Mahiru had always known their feelings weren’t fleeting. He had told her more than once that he intended to stay by her side, far into the future. Still, having someone else say it aloud made the vague, misty understanding inside her suddenly sharpen into something real. Various words blinked in and out of her mind like startled fireflies.

"My, oh my."

"…I-I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's quite all right… I shouldn't pry, of course, but…has he already had a proper talk with you about it?"

"…He hasn't said anything official. Just that he…um, intends to always stay with me. Forever."

Amane wasn't the sort of guy to toss around promises or say things he didn't mean. Mahiru knew this very well, and it was precisely because of this that a faint uneasiness mixed into her flustered thoughts.

"I see. Then perhaps I spoke out of turn," Koyuki murmured.

"What do you mean…?"

"He must have his own thoughts and ideas on the matter. It wouldn't be right for me to speculate aloud, so I'll leave it at that."

"…I understand."

Even if she asked, Koyuki could never truly know what Amane was thinking. And even if she *could* read hearts, he wasn't here—so it was impossible either way.

"Don't worry. I believe he's far more loving than you might believe. Though, since I've never actually met him face-to-face, I suppose I shouldn't speak too confidently."

Mahiru had almost forgotten they'd never met in person. Koyuki understood Amane's nature better than Mahiru ever expected, and yet, in truth, the two had hardly exchanged more than a few words. Aside from brief exchanges over the phone and during email exchanges to set up Mahiru's birthday, and that one call the three of them had together, Amane himself had virtually no connection with Koyuki.

"…I trust your eye to see a person's true nature, Koyuki-san. And because I've learned so much from you, I know that Amane-kun really is…a wonderful person."

"Hehe, I'm glad to hear it. You have no idea how happy it makes me to see you with someone you love enough to brag about."

"I-I'm not…bragging about him."

"If you say so. We'll leave it at that."

Mahiru hadn't meant it as bragging, yet that was clearly how it sounded.

On the monitor, Koyuki was smiling at her, affectionate and amused.

"Truth be told, I would love the chance to meet Fujimiya-san in person—and to speak with his parents, too. But the opportunity just never seems to come."

"I'm sure you're busy, Koyuki-san, and you have your health to think about. I couldn't impose on you. I'm already grateful you take the time to talk with me like this."

"I'm the one who asked for these calls, remember? There's nothing for you to feel guilty about."

Koyuki let out a soft, elegant laugh, then her expression shifted when she noticed the faint apology still lingering on Mahiru's face.

"Hmm… If I can't meet him for now, then I'd like a photo of the two of you instead."

"A…photo?" Mahiru blinked at Koyuki's unexpected request.

Koyuki nodded, her voice and expression both gentle. *"Yes, please. I can't travel to see you right now, and it would be difficult for you to come to me, wouldn't it? Fujimiya-san has his own responsibilities, and with you both entering your final year of school soon, neither of you can just take a casual trip out of the prefecture."*

Amane had once said he wanted to greet Koyuki properly someday, but the right moment never came. For one, Koyuki lived in a completely different part of Japan, and when Mahiru had once looked up her address, she'd discovered just how poor the transportation options were. Just getting there would take a better part of a day.

With Amane juggling work, a rushed trip that left him exhausted the next day was out of the question. Soon they would be buried in exam prep, leaving almost no free time at all. In fact, Amane wasn't even planning to visit his own parents this year so that he could focus entirely on studying—meaning his schedule was already aligned with Mahiru's.

Realistically, the earliest they could visit Koyuki for a proper introduction would be after exams were behind them.

"Oh, I'm not worried about you two. Just listening to you, I can tell how fulfilled you are, how happy your days must be. It's only a selfish wish of mine, wanting to catch a little glimpse of the life you're leading. I'm so far away, I

can't help but be curious."

Every word made it clear how much Koyuki truly cared for her. It felt as though a gentle hand had brushed across Mahiru's cheek, leaving a tender, ticklish warmth in her chest.

Looking back now, Mahiru realized that when she was younger, she hadn't understood the depth of Koyuki's affection. She had always known she cared—that she had been treated like a daughter—but growing older had taught her something new: there were kinds of love a child could not fully grasp until they matured.

"Of course, if you or Fujimiya-san would rather not send a photo, then please forget I said anything. It's only a selfish little wish," Koyuki added, taking Mahiru's silence for rejection.

Startled, Mahiru snapped out of her warm reverie and hurriedly shook her head.

"No, not at all! It's not that I dislike the idea!" Mahiru blurted, flustered. "I don't think Amane-kun would mind either, but…it isn't something I should decide alone. I'll ask him once he gets back home."

"Yes, please do. By the way…"

"Yes?"

"You said, 'Once he gets back home.'"

It was then that Mahiru realized she'd said something that was a completely natural thing for her, but would astonish anyone else. She frantically waved her hands.

"…Th-that's only because…! Yes, I am calling from Amane-kun's place right now! But I swear nothing improper is happening!"

"I never suspected you of anything. Fujimiya-san strikes me as a very earnest young man. I can't imagine him forcing himself on anyone. He would ask for your consent directly, wouldn't he?"

"He would…"

Koyuki read him so accurately that Mahiru was left more stunned than embarrassed.

Amane would never act on a fleeting impulse or push her into anything just because *he* wanted it. He wasn't passive—he was thoughtful. He always paused to ask if something was truly all right before he took things further.

Lately, there were rare moments when he kissed her without asking beforehand—but only when the mood made it obvious she would welcome it. Anything more than that, he never pursued without permission.

Whenever he wanted to touch her, he would ask plainly, *"I want to touch you. Can I?"* And every time, Mahiru said yes—her face burning with embarrassment as she did so.

Once, after she'd told him that he should already know her answer by now, he'd replied, *"But if you didn't actually want it, that would make me a terrible guy. I never want to make you uncomfortable."* It was such a gentlemanly answer that she could only chalk it up to it being part of his nature.

I do love how gentle and thoughtful he is, though!

But at the same time, a tiny part of her wished he would consider just how flustering it was to be asked so directly every single time.

Each time she said yes, it felt like confessing, *"I love it when you touch me."*

The embarrassment that followed could be overwhelming. There were even moments when she caught herself wishing he would be just a little more assertive…before she banished such shameless thoughts out of her head.

Did Koyuki notice the swirl of feelings racing through Mahiru's mind? If she did, she chose not to mention it. She simply watched Mahiru with that same calm, steady gaze.

"What I meant earlier is that I'm happy you've found a place where you belong. The way you spoke just now made it clear. You see his place as your home, don't you?"

"I do." Mahiru's home was wherever Amane was.

When she looked back on it, more than a year had passed since she first began spending time in his apartment. She still sometimes wondered how she had gotten so used to being there.

He had given her a spare key early in their relationship. She remembered wondering if she was really allowed to keep it. It was proof of his deep trust in her, and that thought always left her a little flustered.

After a year of sharing that space, being there felt normal. Before long,

Mahiru had come to see his apartment—or rather, the space beside Amane—as the place she belonged most.

It was their precious home, a place the two of them had built together.

"I'm truly glad you've found a place where you can feel at home."

"…Yes."

"You must be sure not to lose it. And to keep that from happening, you should…"

"I have already grasped his stomach."

"Hehe, excellent."

Mahiru had already guessed exactly where Koyuki was going with that, so she jumped in before she could finish.

Koyuki laughed warmly, no doubt remembering the advice she'd once given Mahiru: *"Make sure you grab the one who makes you happy by the stomach."*

It was thanks in part to that teaching that Mahiru had found the person to whom she wanted to devote her life. Compared to Koyuki, she knew she had a long way to go.

"My advice wasn't wrong after all," Koyuki said with a little chuckle.

Mahiru couldn't help smiling too. The lingering loneliness she once carried melted away. In its place bloomed the warmth that came from thinking about her beloved boyfriend, even though he wasn't there beside her at that moment.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

"So, would it be all right if I sent Koyuki-san a picture of us, Amane-kun?"

When Amane returned from his part-time job, Mahiru explained over dinner what she and Koyuki had talked about, including the request for a photograph. Just as she'd expected, he didn't object and simply nodded.

"Sure, I don't mind at all. But…which one are you planning to send?" he asked.

Mahiru hadn't gotten that far. His question sent her thoughts spinning as she tried to decide what would be best.

"One that shows how cool you are," she answered at last.

"Anything but that. Please."

"I was just kidding. But what's wrong with that?"

"Because it's embarrassing, obviously! Let's just send a normal one, okay? A normal one."

"And what exactly counts as 'normal'?"

"See, Kujikawa-san wants to see what your everyday life looks like. Not some cherry-picked photo. Just you as you are."

"I understand that. But…"

What Koyuki was really asking for was a picture of her and Amane together. Mahiru tried to imagine what that might look like. She was well aware that whenever she stood beside Amane, her face tended to soften into a bright and happy smile. If Koyuki saw that, Mahiru was sure it would put her heart at ease.

"…Problem is, I don't really have many pictures of you on my phone," Amane said. "I don't take many photos, and if we want one with both of us together, it works out best if someone else takes it for us."

It made sense Amane had few photos. He rarely fiddled with his phone, and he almost never took commemorative photos.

"I've only got the ones of you sleeping, in pajamas, or with a milk mustache," he added, completely unbothered.

"Why would you of all things keep *those*!?"

"The pajama pic one wasn't my doing, and I got your permission for the milk mustache one."

The pajama photo must have come from that sleepover when Chitose had snapped a picture and sent it to him; and the milk moustache one, from their little cat café date. She had, admittedly, told him he could keep it, but she never expected him to have held onto it this whole time.

His smug expression earned him a narrow-eyed glare.

"What about the one where I'm sleeping?" Mahiru inquired.

"That one's on me. You looked so cute, my hands just moved on their own… But look who's talking. Are *you* really in any position to criticise, Mahiru?"

He said it with such a radiant, self-assured smile that she couldn't bring

herself to argue.

Mahiru often took photos to remember events or little moments by. Her phone's gallery was overflowing because of it. But as for whether any of those pictures could be sent to Koyuki, the answer was a resounding *no*.

She had amassed quite the collection over time. Pictures from moments when Amane looked cool, moments when he looked endearing, and yes, even a few of him asleep. Of course, she sometimes asked for permission before taking pictures, but Amane had no idea just how many she had actually taken.

Mahiru groaned, "U-ugh… It's such a shame I don't have many photos of you that I can actually show to Koyuki-san. Not that they aren't *all* wonderful, of course."

"…This collection of yours hasn't been growing behind my back, has it?"

"…You're imagining things."

"I mean, it's not like I mind as long as you're the one taking them, Mahiru. I repeat—*as long as you're the one taking them*."

In other words: *"Itsuki and Chitose smuggled you some photos of me, didn't they?"* is what Amane was asking.

Mahiru pressed her lips tightly together and turned her eyes away.

Amane took this as confirmation. "Your silence says it all. Anyway, I'm not going to go digging into your secrets. If there's something you want to keep to yourself, I won't force you to tell me."

"…Thank you."

"So you *do* want to keep it a secret."

"N-no, not a secret exactly, just…um, well…"

"Hey, it's fine; I get it. No need to panic. You just love me so much you want to capture all my different sides, right?"

"…W-well, yes, I do."

"Then I don't mind."

He let her off so easily that Mahiru wondered if he wasn't being a little *too* soft with her—but then again, that was nothing new when it came to Amane.

He was always incredibly sweet to her. From experience, Mahiru knew that if she asked him for something, he would grant it with a smile. She

understood wholeheartedly just how deeply he loved her. And yet, as the one being so thoroughly spoiled, Mahiru sometimes couldn't help but wonder if it was truly good for either of them.

"So that leaves us without a good picture we can send," Amane said. "But I think Kujikawa-san would really appreciate having one with both of us. Want to just take a new one?"

"A new one?"

"Yeah. We could ask Chitose. She likes taking pictures, and she's always snapping shots of you anyway. She'd take a good one for us."

"She sometimes takes those just to tease me, saying she'll send them to you."

"But she almost never does, you know? I told her not to send me anything unless you said it was okay to."

Amane was nothing if not conscientious. Unless Mahiru gave explicit permission, he wouldn't accept a photo from anyone else. The realization only made Mahiru feel more guilty about all the pictures she had acquired of *him*. And since Chitose knew that perfectly well, she seemed to enjoy teasing her with it.

Whenever Chitose said, *"Maybe I'll send this to him!"* Mahiru felt as though she was being forced to confront her own shameless inability to resist wanting more of Amane—and it left her flustered and restless every single time.

"For now, why don't we ask Chitose or Itsuki?" Amane suggested. "They won't turn us down, and they're used to handling a camera. They'd probably take some good ones."

"…That sounds best. I'll ask them at school tomorrow."

"Yeah, let's go with that then… Though I should probably warn them not to take more than we actually need."

"Do you really believe they'll listen to you?"

"I'll screen the pictures before we send them. Anything weird gets the chop."

"I suspect they will go even more overboard if they know you're going to do that."

"You know those two like the back of your hand now, don't you?"

It had been over a year since Mahiru began hanging out with Chitose and Itsuki, long enough that she could more or less predict what they were thinking and exactly how they would behave.

If she asked for help with photos, they would surely say yes immediately. They would absolutely capture the normal, everyday atmosphere that Amane wanted. And just as certainly, they would slip in a few playful shots they found amusing. Mahiru didn't think that was a bad thing. She really didn't. But imagining herself caught on camera in an unguarded moment made her cheeks heat.

She knew all too well that sometimes she forgot she was in public and behaved too sweetly when she was with Amane. Chitose often teased her for being a hopeless case, and Amane himself had a tendency to give her that melting, tender smile even when others were around. Even Mahiru couldn't bear to let anyone else see that.

That smile is meant only for me.

It was the kind of look that told her he loved her more than any words could convey. It could make her feel as though she might melt right into him.

"I'll at least ask them to keep things reasonable," Mahiru sighed.

"Here's hoping they actually listen," Amane replied.

"Indeed."

She knew perfectly well they would most likely do the opposite, snapping photos left and right under the noble pretext of *helping* her. Still, there was no real alternative. They would have to entrust the matter to those two.

Amane and Mahiru glanced at one another, then exchanged troubled smiles.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

The very next afternoon, Mahiru brought Chitose and Itsuki to a nearby park, saying she had something to discuss. As planned with Amane, she asked for the favor. Amane was busy with work, but leaving Mahiru to ask

them posed no problem at all.

"Huh, photos? Sure, we can do that. But what for?" Chitose asked.

Just as Mahiru expected, they agreed without hesitation, though both of them eyed her with curiosity as if to say, *"You don't like having your photo taken. Wha's going on?"*

It wasn't that either she or Amane disliked being photographed. They simply didn't make a habit of it, which left the two understandably puzzled.

"Um, well…how should I put this?" Mahiru began. "There's someone who's something of a parental figure to me, and I wanted to send her some photos as a little update. She said she would love to see pictures of Amane-kun and me."

"Ahh, gotcha… Hold on—then isn't this a huge responsibility!?" Chitose yelped.

"N-no, it's nothing that serious! They don't need to be special or curated or anything. She just said she'd like to see us as we usually are!"

Chitose assumed it was a much more momentous thing than it was, so Mahiru shook her head in a panic. She had completely forgotten how the request might sound: taking pictures for someone's parental guardian did seem like a heavy responsibility, and she hadn't meant to make them feel pressured.

She had to make it clear that all she wanted was a few ordinary shots. Otherwise, whoever held the camera would feel so pressured that they wouldn't be able to take photos properly.

"I'm not trying to take studio portraits or anything like those flashy, picture-perfect photos. She just wants to see ordinary moments, like how we are when we're together, or how we live our day-to-day life."

"Got it…but you're sure just normal ones are fine? Really?" Chitose asked, still sounding unconvinced.

"Yes, I'm sure. You see…um, I worried her a lot because I didn't have any close friends in elementary or middle school. I think she just wants to see what kind of life I'm living now."

It was from the time when Mahiru kept up a hopeless struggle, day after day. She had wanted her biological parents to acknowledge her so desperately that she'd started to act like the perfect, ideal child that adults

would praise and use as an example for others.

She wouldn't deny she was still something of a "model child" now, but back then, throughout elementary and middle school, she had lived as an exaggerated version of one. Looking back, she could only shake her head at how long she kept the act going.

People called her a people-pleaser, and she never denied it. They were right. She treated everyone with kindness, yet always maintained a clear line that no one else was allowed to cross. As a result, she never made close friends like Chitose or Ayaka.

On top of that, the unwanted attention she received from boys stirred resentment from the girls around her, and many of those who approached her did so only because they saw some advantage to be gained. With all of that, she had never found anyone she could truly open her heart to.

It was no wonder Koyuki grew curious about the blissful, dream-come-true environment Mahiru now lived in.

"Ahh, I get it," Chitose said suddenly. "You mean back when you were in *Perfect Angel Mode*."

"What is that shady, mortifying 'mode' supposed to be?" Mahiru replied flatly.

Itsuki stared at Chitose deadpan. "Worst name ever."

"Pipe down, Ikkun. Obviously I mean when Mahirun was acting like the Angel. When she had exactly zero friends."

"Ugh… B-but now I have you and Kido-san…"

Now, Mahiru had close friends in Chitose and Ayaka. She wasn't alone anymore. The loneliness she had once endured, made even harsher by being surrounded by people she couldn't let in, was no longer part of her life.

"Yup yup! Us, friends! Best, buds!"

"Why are you suddenly speaking in broken English!?"

"I'm just messing with you. Don't get all sulky. You're my number one bestie, Mahirun!"

Chitose gave her a few enthusiastic pats on the shoulder. For someone who could make friends faster than anyone Mahiru had ever met, it meant something that she placed Mahiru at the very top.

“So, yes, um, I just want to put her mind at ease…” Mahiru said quietly. “To show her that I’ve found a place for myself, and that there are people who truly understand me.”

“I see, I see. You really care about her, huh,” Chitose replied.

“…Yes, even though she’s not my real parent.”

It would have been wonderful if Koyuki *had* been her real mother. Mahiru had once dreamed that maybe, Koyuki actually was.

But life gave her absent parents whose interest in her was so lacking that it was questionable whether she even existed to them. She had long since accepted that truth. She no longer felt the need to chase after them. They were relatives by blood, nothing more.

A faint bitterness rose in her throat, but she forced a small smile and swallowed it down.

Chitose watched in silence.

“That doesn’t matter, right?” she said at last. “I don’t think blood is everything. I mean, husbands and wives aren’t related by blood either. In fact, it’s even more amazing that you built something that deep with this person *without* being related. You should be proud of that.”

Mahiru felt blessed to have friends who thought this way—who said it and meant it. She wanted to share that same joy with Koyuki too, to let her know how happy she was to have such wonderful friends. Chitose’s radiant smile made her feel that way, and Mahiru threw her arms around her tightly.

“…I really do like you, Chitose-san,” Mahiru murmured.

“Heh, look at you,” Chitose laughed softly. “You’ve gotten so much more open with your feelings.”

“It’s thanks to all of you. That’s why I want to show her how my life changed for the better.”

“Well, who wouldn’t want to see how adorable you’ve turned out?”

“Isn’t this the perfect time for a picture?” Itsuki cut in.

“Oh! Good point! Ikkun, take one, take one!”

“Leave it to me.”

Rather than complain to Mahiru for clinging to his girlfriend, Itsuki actually nudged her a little closer. Mahiru counted him among her

wonderful friends.

The embarrassment hit her cheeks as Itsuki raised his phone and began snapping away. Chitose, however, only tightened her arms around her, making escape impossible. Overwhelmed, Mahiru buried her face in Chitose's shoulder, hoping it would hide how flustered she was.

Her past self could never have imagined anything like this—that one day she'd be holding a friend so tightly, and that she'd be the one reaching out first.

Embarrassment, joy, and happiness mixed together and bubbled warmly in her chest like a rich stew of bliss, reaching for the loneliness that had once lived deep in her heart.

Chitose kept Mahiru wrapped in her arms for a moment longer, then, looking satisfied, gave her a gentle pat on the back before finally letting go.

"Alright! Just leave it to us!" she declared. "All we need to do is get some cute, lovey-dovey shots of you and Amane, right? Or maybe some with us too?"

"L-lovey-dovey ones would be a bit much…" Mahiru protested, cheeks warming.

"Ehh? So we can't take pictures of you being all cuddly?"

"It would make me happy, but…"

"Then it's settled! We *have* to take some!"

"…You don't mean of me and Amane-kun, do you?"

"I have *nooo idea* what you're talking about," Chitose replied, feigning ignorance.

"Good grief."

Chitose might tease, but Mahiru knew she would never take a picture that was truly embarrassing or uncomfortable. That thought brought her a smile of relief.

I wonder how I look to my lovely friends, Mahiru thought excitedly, deciding to leave everything in her friends' hands.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

"So yeah! We'll probably be taking pictures over the next few days, but don't mind us!" Chitose announced the next day at school, gathering their usual group to deliver the news.

This was no surprise to Amane. Mahiru had already told him that Chitose and Itsuki had agreed to help. Ayaka and Yuuta, however, stared back in confusion, caught off guard by the sudden declaration.

"So, just to make sure I'm getting this right," Ayaka asked, "you're taking pictures of Shiina-san doing, like…regular, everyday stuff?"

"Yes, that's the plan," Mahiru replied. "It doesn't have to be only me, though. It could be all of us spending time together, or Amane-kun doing something. What matters is showing what my daily life looks like now."

“Okie dokie, I gotcha,” Ayaka said, though she looked a bit uneasy. “I’m just kinda nervous about someone actually seeing these.”

“Oh, of course, if there’s a time you don’t want to be in the picture, just tell us,” Mahiru assured her.

“No, no, it’s not that I don’t want to! It’s just…it might feel awkward if I’m in your lovey-dovey photos. Like I’m intruding.”

Amane blinked at her, utterly baffled. “What are you even talking about…?”

Mahiru, on the other hand, understood immediately. If she were in a picture of Chitose and Itsuki being affectionate, she’d probably feel a little out of place too. Since Ayaka had said she didn’t mind participating, Mahiru decided she would make sure no one felt uncomfortable or self-conscious.

When she glanced at Amane, who still clearly didn’t get it but had decided to accept it anyway, she smiled.

“I’m grateful everyone’s willing to help, since I’m also asking,” Amane said. “However…”

“What?”

Amane glanced warily between Chitose and her boyfriend. “You two better not take any weird photos. Don’t forget I’ll be checking them after.”

He was clearly worried about that point, given how he looked at the lovebird pair. Mahiru couldn’t help but give a wry smile.

He doesn’t need to be that *suspicious…* she thought.

“Wow, okay Mr. Scrupulous,” Chitose replied. “Relax. We know who we’re taking these for. We won’t mess around.”

“I’ll take your word for it then…”

“Sure, you won’t fool around taking the pictures,” Yuuta said. “But I can definitely see you snapping some of us fooling around.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Uh, this is when you’re supposed to deny it,” Amane quipped.

Amane might have been cautious of Chitose and Itsuki, but Mahiru had asked them to capture her everyday life and moments of joy. She wasn’t going to stop them unless they went too far.

“You’re gonna check them anyway, so just delete whatever you don’t like,” Chitose said. “Besides, didn’t the lady you’re sending these to want

candid shots? Or are you trying to present a carefully manufactured version of yourself?"

"*Urk…*"

"And that, my friends, is my victory!"

"What kind of competition was that…?" Amane looked mildly disgruntled at being "defeated" by such dubious logic, but even he had to admit Chitose had a point. In the end, he sighed and only said, "Fine. Just don't overdo it."

"Well, best we don't mess around *too* much in the photos," Itsuki added. "Also, instead of having Chi take everything, it'd be better if we rotate. That way no one gets left out. Don't worry, nothing's getting leaked."

"The moment one does, I'm done helping you and Chitose study," Amane warned.

"None will leak! I promise!"

Itsuki's lightning-fast reply was so amusing that Mahiru and Amane exchanged a glance and instantly burst into laughter. Their laughter spread like ripples, and soon everyone around them joined in.

A gentle warmth bloomed in her chest.

"Well then, you two just relax and act normal, okay? We'll capture you exactly as you are," Itsuki said, finishing with a playful wink to show there was nothing to worry about.

Mahiru didn't doubt him. Itsuki might joke around and tease Amane every chance he got, but he understood boundaries. He was loyal, thoughtful, and always willing to help his friends.

"I'm still kind of worried, but I'm counting on you," Amane said.

"Still? Wow, harsh," Itsuki protested.

"You don't exactly have the cleanest record when it comes to taking sneak photos."

"…Well, it should be fine this time?"

"You sound unsure. Which means you know exactly why I'm worried."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean," Itsuki said, averting his eyes.

Everyone could tell he was teasing, including Amane.

"Good grief."

He shrugged his shoulders wide and chuckled.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

Although they had decided to take photos, nothing about their daily routine had actually changed.

Classes still filled most of the day, so no one was snapping pictures then. At most, they managed a few group shots during breaks or lunch when everyone gathered together.

Amane had made lunch for the two of them that day, and when Mahiru praised his cooking, Yuuta and the others joined in with their own compliments. Itsuki captured a picture of Amane looking flustered, gaze turned away, which made everyone burst out laughing. For some reason, Chitose even began documenting the impromptu *"Amane's Homemade Lunch Review"* that followed.

"Wow, you guys sure don't hold back… Well, I made it, so I guess I can't complain," Amane said.

The conversation shifted to how much Amane's cooking had improved, and what began as a few bites to taste-test the meal eventually turned into a full-on sharing and review session. Amane could only watch them with a look of disbelief.

"You'd hog it all to yourself if Mahirun made it," Chitose declared. "But since you cooked today, we're just trading our side dishes with yours. We're not about to steal from Mahirun's box, y'know?"

"So Mahiru gets a free pass?" Amane asked, unimpressed.

"Of course she does. I'm sure she wants to keep your cooking all to herself, so yeah, we're not cruel enough to go after her share."

"But still cruel enough to take mine…?"

While Amane and Chitose continued their back-and-forth, everyone else was already picking through Amane's lunchbox, chiming in with things like:

"This tastes awesome! Gimme the recipe."

"I'm impressed you're actually eating greens."

"Sou-chan would love this!"

Everyone already knew Amane had taken up cooking, but they rarely had the chance to actually taste his food, so this turned into a new and surprisingly fun experience for the group. By the time they were done, most of Amane's side dishes had been traded away, and he seemed to enjoy sampling everyone else's food just as much.

"This is the last time I'm doing this," Amane grumbled.

He says that, but I think he'd still swap side dishes if someone asked him nicely. Mahiru thought, giggling at the look on his face. *He's so not honest with himself.*

For the record, the unanimous winner of the *"tastiest item in Amane's lunch"* contest was the tsukune stuffed with quail eggs.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

After they finished lunch and got through their classes, the group decided they might as well take a few photos of themselves hanging out off-campus.

Amane wasn't working that day, so after tossing around a few ideas, all six of them headed to a nearby indoor leisure complex. Out of everyone, Ayaka was by far the most excited.

"Wow, Kadowaki-kun. Now that I'm getting a good look, I can tell how built your upper body is. Your posture's perfect, and your core strength is amazing," she said as she watched him play.

Track and field was Yuuta's speciality, but he handled just about any sport like it was nothing. Against him, Amane and Itsuki didn't stand a chance without some kind of handicap. No matter what game they tried, Yuuta demolished them.

Ayaka complimented him with a bright, earnest smile—nothing but pure admiration behind her words. Everyone there understood that perfectly well.

Yuuta, however, gave a strained little smile, his shoulders twitching almost imperceptibly. He knew exactly what kind of physique Ayaka admired, but it seemed this was the first time she'd commented on his so directly. He looked completely lost—maybe even a little put off.

Even so, he smoothed things over quickly with a courteous, “Thanks.”

That alone showed just how composed he truly was.

“Akazawa-kun, um…yeah, you should probably work a little harder,” Ayaka said.

“Am I really that bad?” Itsuki groaned.

“It’s not about good or bad. You’re just, uh…kind of skinny.”

“I’m not exactly trying to cater to your tastes here.”

“Even if you were, that’d be a problem for me. I’ve already got Sou-chan, remember? Sorry, Akazawa-kun…”

“And I’ve got Chi, you know!?” Itsuki shot back.

“Oh no, are you cheating on me, Ikkun?” Chitose gasped dramatically.

“How in the world did you get *that* from what I just said!?” Itsuki cried.

Mahiru giggled slightly. It was the kind of lighthearted teasing that only existed between friends who were truly at ease with one another. Just then, Amane quietly stepped closer. He leaned in to her ear.

“…What about me? Do I get a passing grade from you, Mahiru?” he murmured.

He must have gotten curious after Ayaka called Itsuki skinny.

Amane was still on the lean side, but ever since spring he had kept up with his workouts and jogging to build stamina. Thanks to that steady effort, his once bony frame had begun to fill out in a healthy way. Nothing obvious showed through his shirt, but Mahiru knew very well what lay underneath.

“I’d give you a passing grade no matter what, Amane-kun…but I genuinely do think you look wonderful. You’re slender, but it’s like everything is compact and firm,” she replied.

“Well, that’s a relief. Not that I mind, but I can’t help thinking Kido influenced—”

“What about me?” Ayaka suddenly popped her head into the conversation, having drifted over from the others, and both Mahiru and Amane jolted in surprise.

“I was just saying you corrupted Mahiru with your fetishes.”

“I didn’t tempt her, though? I only helped her recognize the charm in it.”

“So yeah, tempting?”

“I-It’s not Kido-san’s fault! I just…like looking at and touching your body.”

“Mahiru, that came out wrong, so let’s stop there.”

What she meant was that she liked tracing the results of Amane’s hard work with her eyes and fingertips. But Amane seemed to take it another way, and in a panic, he pressed his hand over her mouth to silence her.

“*Mmph*,” came her muffled protest. Mahiru looked up at him, her eyes almost accusatory, only to see Amane’s face faintly flushed again, even though he’d already cooled down from exercising. His gaze carried a quiet plea, as if trying to reason with her.

“Whew, things are heating up.”

“Kido…”

“Sorry, sorry. But if you ask me, I think Shiina-san only said that because she’s sooo crazy about you.” Ayaka laughed, then added, “She wouldn’t have said something that bold otherwise.”

…Bold. Mahiru rolled the word around in her head, repeating it to herself.

Only then did she realize that, depending on how one heard it, what she’d said earlier sounded terribly improper. Just like Amane, her cheeks flushed red.

“Th-that’s not what I meant,” Mahiru blurted.

“I know, I know. You just gaze at that chiseled body of his, lose yourself, then touch him and swoon all over again, right?” Ayaka guessed.

“N-no, it’s not nearly that extreme!”

Amane raised an eyebrow. “Oh really…?”

“Not you too, Amane-kun!”

Mahiru tried to insist that she wasn’t nearly as obsessed as Ayaka made it sound, but Amane’s eyes didn’t exactly deny it. As for Ayaka, she wore a smug, satisfied smile that only grew bigger and bigger.

“As far as I’m concerned, you should enjoy his body as much as you want. You have that privilege as his girlfriend.”

“Y-you may be right, but I…”

“Don’t go tempting Mahiru like that.”

“Aww.”

“Don’t ‘aww’ me.”

“What on earth are you guys talking about…?”

Itsuki walked over, apparently curious that Amane, Mahiru, and Ayaka had drifted a little apart from the group. Chitose and Yuuta followed behind him.

“About how Shiina-san loves Fujimiya-kun lots,” Ayaka answered.

“What, you two showing off again?” Itsuki looked at Amane and Mahiru incredulously.

“No, but sure, let’s just go with that.” Amane didn’t feel like explaining what had really happened, and so brushed it off instead.

Mahiru was grateful for it. From experience, she knew that if the earlier exchange came up again, Chitose would no doubt grin and tease her by saying something like, *“Mahirun, you’re so bold!”* Thanks to Amane’s deflection, she was spared that embarrassment.

“Well, I don’t mind you two flirting, but if we can’t get photos of the stars of the show actually having fun, then what are we even here for!? Come on, Mahirun, let’s play too!” Chitose spoke excitedly.

“Huh? Wait, I’m not exactly dressed for lots of movement—”

“They’ve got darts, archery, and billiards over there. They’ve got an arcade part too, so we can hit the crane games, medal games, or even rhythm games! We came all this way, so it’d be a waste not to have fun!”

“Leave the photos to me. You all just go play,” Amane said.

“Exactly! Now, let’s go, let’s go!” With that burst of enthusiasm, Chitose grabbed Mahiru’s hand.

Ayaka followed suit, seizing her other hand and giving her a playful little lift. “You see? If you come to a place like this, you’ve got to enjoy it to the fullest. C’mon, let’s have some fun!”

Knowing Mahiru rarely had chances to visit places like this, the two girls pulled her along with bright smiles.

What should I do…? Mahiru glanced toward Amane, only to find him smiling softly. His eyes shone with the same admiring look Ayaka had worn earlier.

"They invited you, so you should definitely go. Have fun."

His gentle smile felt like a nudge on her back. After a brief moment of hesitation, Mahiru thanked the two girls for reaching out to her and stepped forward of her own accord to join them.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

Once Chitose decided to do something, she always saw it through. She ended up taking photos far more often than Mahiru had expected.

Starting with Amane's bento taste test the other day, she had also captured photos of their time at the leisure complex, moments at the family restaurant, study sessions in the classroom, and even scenes of them grabbing snacks on the go. With Itsuki, Ayaka, and Yuuta helping out, the pictures showed Mahiru talking, laughing, and playing with all sorts of people.

Of course, Mahiru felt bad about making everyone go along with it day after day, so at a certain point she insisted they had enough. But then, under the pretense that there was still one last kind of picture she wanted to take, Chitose came to Mahiru with a special request.

"Since I'm staying over at Mahirun's tonight, I'm officially her after-school photographer!"

Originally, the plan had been to start sorting through which pictures to finally send to Koyuki. But Chitose's insistence got the project a one-day extension.

That morning, Amane had casually suggested they look through the pictures together after getting home. Naturally, he hadn't heard a word about this change, so as he packed up for the day, he glanced over at Mahiru, unable to hide his confusion.

"Is she?" he asked.

"This is the first I've heard of it," Mahiru replied.

“Mahirun!?”

Mahiru giggled, “Just kidding. I’m very grateful. Thank you.”

“…Wow, Mahirun’s starting to become quite the prankster.”

“You always play pranks on me every chance you get, so…”

Amane casually picked up Mahiru’s bag once she was ready, backing her up in her little joke. “Yeah. If anything, she does it too often, so keep it up.”

“Boo! Boo!” Chitose grumbled her dissatisfaction, but she didn’t actually seem to mind.

Seeing that, Mahiru let out a soft laugh, took Chitose’s hand, and the three of them left the classroom together.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

“Since Chitose-san’s here today, that makes three portions.”

With Chitose staying over, dinner would naturally have to be for three.

Amane wasn’t working this evening, so the plan was to stop by the supermarket together and decide on a menu. Their fridge was barren after several days of eating out and hanging around with friends, which made today’s shopping trip inevitable. With Chitose joining in at the last minute, though, it all worked out just fine.

The three of them chatted about what to make for dinner as they headed toward the nearest supermarket.

Amane glanced at Chitose. “One serving enough for you?”

“Why do you make it sound like I eat a ton…? Well, I guess this *is* Mahirun’s precious home cooking we’re talking about. So, what’s on the menu?”

“Let’s see… What would you like?” Mahiru inquired.

Chitose beamed. “Something spicy!”

As expected. No surprises there.

Amane furrowed his brows at Chitose’s cheery request.

“You look like you just swallowed a lemon,” she said.

“No, you’re our guest. We’ve got to put your wishes first,” Amane stated.

“You sound so reluctant.”

“Only because your standard for spicy blows *way* past mine.”

“Oh, you’ll be fine. After a certain point, all spice levels feel the same anyway.”

“…Mahiru.”

“Hehe, don’t worry. I’ll be sure to prepare separate portions.”

Mahiru already knew full well how high Chitose’s spice tolerance, and her demands, were. The moment she heard the request, she had decided she would cook different versions for them. To her, that much was hardly any trouble at all.

She then asked, “By the way, do you have anything specific in mind?”

“Hmm, it’s not like I want you to pull out all the stops and make something super complicated… Lemme think. How about something simple, like mapo tofu? Tofu’s healthy, and you can eat tons of it.”

Mahiru felt relieved—that wouldn’t take much extra work. With mapo tofu, she could just adjust the heat afterward with Sichuan pepper, chili oil, or chili flakes, so there was no need to prepare completely separate dishes.

From beside her, though, she heard Amane’s doubtful little murmur: “Healthy…?”

Well, I can’t say the one I’m making is especially good for you.

Mahiru wasn’t planning to use a store-bought sauce packet but her own blend of seasonings, packed with plenty of ground meat. Add in the chili oil for adjusting the spice, and there was no way she could honestly call it healthy… But pointing that out to Chitose would’ve been cruel, so she kept quiet.

The *tofu* was healthy, at least compared to the meat. So technically, Chitose wasn’t wrong.

Catching on to Mahiru’s choice to not say anything back, Amane wore an expression that all but said “Ah, well.” He clearly had no intention of spoiling Chitose’s innocent delight either.

“What about the side dishes?” Mahiru asked them.

“Something not spicy,” Amane said without missing a beat.

“Do you really think I’m going to demand everything be fiery hot…? I don’t have any other requests, so you two should pick what you like.”

Since Chitose didn’t seem picky as long as the food tasted good, Mahiru

decided on something light and healthy to balance the meal. She conveyed the idea to Amane with a subtle glance, silently jotting down the evening's shopping list in her head.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

The grocery run didn't take long at all.

Since they had already settled on the menu, there was no need for their usual back-and-forth about buying enough for several days. With a guest over, they only picked up what was needed for tonight—plus an extra carton of eggs and some milk.

It wasn't much in terms of bulk, though it still came out to two bags' worth.

"Um, I can carry some of that." Mahiru offered, looking at what Amane was carrying.

At the moment, Amane had both Mahiru's school bag and the supermarket haul in his arms, with his own school bag slung over his shoulder on top of that. His hands were completely full, and the load looked like no small burden.

"It's not that heavy, so don't worry," he said.

"But I can't make you carry everything…"

"I said it's fine. It really isn't heavy."

"But my textbooks are in there…"

"I've been working out, and I haul heavy stuff at work anyway. This is nothing."

Mahiru felt terribly guilty, since it was her bag he was carrying—something she ought to be holding herself. But Amane showed no sign of giving in.

"Mm-hmm, what a gentleman." Chitose grinned at the sight, amused as anything.

But Amane still refused to hand anything over. "Don't make fun of me."

Mahiru wished she could at least carry her own bag, but no matter how she thought to persuade him, he wouldn't budge. Just as she was mulling it

over, Chitose sidled up closer.

"Mahirun, Mahirun—this is when you say, 'But I wanted to hold your hand…' Then he'll hand you a bag."

"Oh, I see!"

"Don't go teaching her nonsense."

"Ohh? So holding hands counts as nonsense now?"

"Not what I meant!"

Amane shook his head frantically to deny it. Sensing that his insistence was starting to crumble, Mahiru inched closer to him, then timidly tilted her gaze upward to meet his.

Chitose had once told her that in moments like this, the one who pressed forward would emerge victorious.

"…Would it be so wrong if we went home holding hands?"

"*Guh…*"

"I don't want to leave everything on your shoulders, Amane-kun. I'd rather share the load with you… Do you dislike that?"

Mahiru looked up at him with troubled eyes as they kept walking.

"…Here, you can hold this one then."

Under her steady gaze, Amane finally sighed in defeat and handed something over—the culprit tying up his hand.

It was a small bag, which held nothing more than the eggs and a few seasonings they'd been short on.

"Um, this is the lightest one…"

Mahiru shot Amane a sharp look that said, *"Not this one!"* and her dissatisfaction was written all over her face. But he only feigned innocence.

"We're sharing the burden, and now we can hold hands. I kept my promise. Didn't lie."

After handing Mahiru the small bag, he had shifted her schoolbag to the same hand that carried the other grocery bags, which freed the hand closest to Mahiru.

Technically, he had granted her wish to hold his hand while helping carry the bags, but this wasn't quite what she'd meant.

"Looks like Amane was one step ahead of you this time, eh?" Chitose observed. "Still, you two get along so adorably well. Nothing wrong with

that."

With his now-free hand, Amane firmly clasped Mahiru's, giving it a gentle squeeze to soothe her protests. The very culprit who'd egged her on—Chitose—laughed gleefully at the scene.

Amane wore the same loose smile next to her.

"Come on now, no tantrums. I kept my promise, didn't I?"

"T-tantrums… Geez, you're terrible!"

How cheeky of him.

Mahiru shot him a long, reproachful stare, but he didn't flinch. He only softened his smile in a way that soothed her more than it scolded. Grinding her teeth, Mahiru imagined how Amane must have felt earlier when he'd groaned, and found herself letting out a frustrated little "*Grr…*"

From behind came the sound of Chitose's amused chuckle. Mahiru gave in and walked by Amane's side like she said she wanted to.

His hand gripped hers firmly, their fingers were entwining so tight it was as if he wouldn't let her slip away. Feeling the warmth and rough strength of his hand, the small spark of anger within her slowly fizzled out, which was quickly replaced by a restless, ticklish kind of frustration.

"…Next time, we will split it fifty-fifty."

"Okay, okay."

"And I mean by *weight*, not number of bags."

When Amane didn't respond, Mahiru squeezed his hand again and again in protest, but his firm palm didn't budge. Moments like this made her keenly aware of his boyish strength. She pressed her lips together, feeling embarrassed, and peeved at the same time.

Amane only chuckled softly and gave her hand a gentle squeeze in return.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

"So yeah, if you two could just act normal like I'm not here, that would be great."

"You're asking the impossible."

Chitose made that request the moment they stepped foot into Amane's apartment, and Amane immediately denied its plausibility.

Spending time as he always did with Mahiru was one thing, but Chitose was in the room with them.

She was a close friend, someone they could relax around, and even a benefactor who had helped them grew closer until they started dating. But letting her see how intimately they usually interacted? The embarrassment far outweighed any comfort.

"Oh please, don't mind me at all."

"How can I *not*?"

"'Cause you are free to be as lovey-dovey as you want?"

"You've got the perfect excuse to take photos, so I just know you're going to take an insane amount of them."

"Bingo."

Sure enough, that was Chitose's aim. She flashed a sly grin while giving her phone a little wave, making the vein at Amane's temple twitch.

Chitose paid no notice to the irritation written plain as day across Amane's face.

With her usual carefree smile, she chirped, "Kyaa, I'm *so* scared. Time for a quick photo," and raised her phone as if nothing were amiss.

"…So annoying," Amane muttered under his breath, voice low.

Mahiru could tell that he wasn't truly irritated or angry, but that he was just a little exasperated.

"Now, now…" She stepped in to soothe him before his frown deepened further, heading into the kitchen to brew his favorite milk tea.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

After smoothing over Amane's mood and sharing a bit of small talk, they decided to get an early start on dinner preparations. So Mahiru and Amane found themselves standing together in the kitchen.

"Don't worry, I'll capture everything perfectly," Chitose declared, smugly raising her phone from the other side of the counter.

Mahiru had indeed asked her to take photos of their everyday life. But with Chitose so boldly poised to shoot, it was hard not to feel self-conscious, or a little stiff under the lens.

"Why do you look like you're having so much fun with this?" Mahiru asked.

"Eh? Well, obviously, it's fun watching you two enjoying yourselves. And I might pick up some cooking tips. I'd love to be able to make your super-tasty slightly spicy dishes myself."

"*Slightly* spicy…?" Amane retorted.

Chitose turned to Amane. "That's what throws you off? Never mind. Anyway, c'mon. This is your chance to show off what a capable guy you are, yanno?"

"Like I'd do something that fake."

Amane didn't even bother to hide his disbelief at Chitose's choice of words, and Mahiru, for her part, didn't see anything here worth showing off about either.

Koyuki already knew that Mahiru and Amane often cooked together. It wasn't anything unusual, just part of their everyday routine. Capturing that in photos made sense, but framing it as something worth "showing off" didn't sit right with her.

Amane seemed to feel the same. "Idiot…" he muttered, brushing her comment off as he tied on his apron.

The sight of him like that struck Chitose as rare, and she immediately started snapping photos. Mahiru let her be, focusing instead on pulling the ingredients for dinner out of the fridge.

"Let's start with the side dishes. They will need time to cool," she said.

"Yeah, plus mapo tofu's best when it's piping hot," Amane added.

For tonight's dinner, they planned on sweet-and-sour napa cabbage, simmered kabocha squash, and an egg-and-tomato soup. Since it lacked many greens, Mahiru decided to add some sesame-dressed green beans she had prepared earlier for balance.

They chose to begin with the cabbage and kabocha, splitting the work between them.

Back when they had first started cooking together, Amane often just

assisted Mahiru. But now, he handled things on his own, moving with enough awareness not to block her flow. He could even anticipate her next step from what she was doing and adjust accordingly.

With Amane beside her doing his thing, Mahiru's cooking went all the more smoothly.

"Mahiru, are you using dried chilies for the mapo tofu?"

"No, not this time. I will be adding chili powder instead."

"Mind if I put some in? We only have a bit left."

"Go ahead. We have more, so if it runs out, I can get a new pack."

"Yeah, we won't be needing that."

"That was quick."

Mahiru couldn't help laughing at Amane's firm refusal to suffer through spice. His expression tightened when he heard her, and he muttered with a prickly tone, "Just a little heat is fine. You don't need to make it really spicy."

He's adorable when he gets like this, Mahiru thought fondly as she slipped the sliced kabocha squash into the simmering broth. Then, she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. A camera lens was carefully pointed in her direction.

"Chitose-san?"

"Yes?"

"Are you…taking pictures?"

The way she was moving her phone didn't look like she was taking a picture at all.

Drawn by Mahiru's voice, Amane paused his work as well, then lifted his head and squinted at Chitose.

"Hey…are you recording a video?"

"Wow, sharp eyes."

"Uh, what's that supposed to mean?"

It seemed she really had been snapping photos earlier, but now, for whatever reason, Chitose had switched over to video mode. She only laughed at Amane's retort, making no move whatsoever to press the stop button.

"This one's not for sending to people. It's got my voice and Amane being

mean to me in it," Chitose then said.

"Except that you're the one acting in a way that deserves a scolding," Amane shot back.

"Now, now," Mahiru jumped in. "I'm sure Chitose-san knows where to draw the line."

"I'll just send it to you two later. *Heh heh heh*."

"What's with that weird grin?"

"Oh, nothing at aaall!"

Her cheerful laughter couldn't be any more suspicious, but with the stove going, neither Mahiru nor Amane could break away to press her on it. So, without uncovering the true meaning behind her giddy smile, they carried on cooking.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

Once dinner was cooked, they set the dishes out on the low table. There was no way the usual dining table could fit three full servings.

Chitose watched on in awe as the meal was being laid out one plate after another in front of her eyes.

It was nothing extravagant, only a standard home-cooked assortment of dishes. They had met her request, but it was otherwise just an ordinary menu that was colorful enough to look pleasant, with the nutrition decently balanced.

It was nothing worth getting so impressed about, yet to Chitose, it all seemed novel. Her eyes lingered on the completed dinner with plain fascination.

"…You eat like this every day, Amane?" she asked.

Amane looked up. "Depends what you mean by 'like this,' but yeah, pretty much. One main dish, two or three sides, and a bowl of soup. As for the spicy stuff you two have in front of you, though? Definitely not."

"If I served him that, Amane-kun would get upset," Mahiru added.

To fulfill Chitose's request, they had split the mapo tofu into two versions. Amane's portion was made their usual way, with mild seasonings

just enough for a faint kick. Mahiru and Chitose's, on the other hand, was a spicier and more colorful version of the same basic recipe. Chili powder was stirred in halfway during cooking, then it was finished with freshly ground Sichuan pepper and chili oil after plating.

It was spicy enough to make one sweat, but that wasn't all. It also gave a deep, numbing savor that tingled across the tongue. The fragrance alone was enough to stoke anyone's appetite.

"There's no way I could ever handle your kind of spice," Amane admitted.

"But Mahirun eats it?" Chitose returned.

"I've grown to like it a little lately… So please don't torment Amane-kun about it," Mahiru mumbled.

"Actually, he's being tormented by your amazing cooking skills, not me."

"That's why I made separate portions in the first place, so he could still have some."

"And I'm really grateful for that," Amane thanked. "I'll handle the dishes after, so it's fine if you add to the pile. I do feel bad for making you go through the trouble of making two batches of mapo tofu, but since Chitose came all this way, I get wanting to serve her something she likes."

Mahiru considered it no trouble at all. But from Amane's point of view, having her go out of her way to make a "special" dish for someone felt like an imposition. His expression said it all… He was glad to welcome Chitose, yet simply couldn't stomach food made to her standards, so this compromise was the only option left.

"Mm, see, that shows how kind and understanding you are. I'm grateful that I'm getting food tailored to my tastes, and it makes me super happy. But are you sure you don't wanna challenge yourself once in a while, Amane?"

"Yeah, no thanks."

His flat refusal left no room for negotiation. Mahiru and Chitose exchanged a smile at his stubbornness before the three of them finally turned to their meal while it was still hot.

They dug into their steaming mapo tofu. The first thing to hit Mahiru's tongue was the bright, citrusy, almost floral-like fragrance of the Sichuan

pepper. Then came the assault of heat on her tongue.

But it wasn't just spicy. The rich aroma of well-seared ground pork infused into the sauce, which clung to the tofu in a savory glaze. The tofu itself was lightly pre-boiled to remove excess moisture, leaving it silky and springy, which paired perfectly with the hearty sauce to flood the mouth with rich umami.

And just as the spice began to fade, the numbing tingle of pepper surged in to deepen the flavor even further. For those who could handle the heat, it was divine.

Chitose's face lit up as she shoveled rice into it. "Delicious! What did you do to make it this good?" If her beaming expression was any indication, it was clearly to her taste.

"Oh, it's nothing complicated. I boiled the tofu properly, cooked the ground meat through, didn't overmix, and grinded the Sichuan pepper right before adding it. That's about it."

It was a relatively simple dish all things considered, since no deep frying was involved. Most of Mahiru's other spicy recipes either required frying or began with blending curry-like spice mixes. Compared to those, mapo tofu was an easy way to balance heat and flavor, simple enough that she sometimes made it for herself on nights Amane wasn't home.

Amane watched Chitose's blissful grin as she happily devoured her food, then glanced down at Mahiru's portion of mapo tofu beside him. He must have been wondering if it could really taste that good.

"…So, how spicy are we talking?" he asked Mahiru.

"Hmm…it's not that bad, honestly. Would you like to try some?"

If she could share some with him, Mahiru wanted Amane to give it a taste. Especially since he'd shown interest.

"I won't die, will I?"

"You'll be fine…I think."

"You *think*?"

"Well, chili and Sichuan peppers are two different kinds of spice, you see… And since I used a fair amount this time, it does pack quite the punch."

For her own and Chitose's portions, she had stirred in chili powder partway through, then finished with freshly ground pepper and chili oil. It

wasn't enough to make Amane breathe fire, but she could easily imagine him writhing in discomfort for a while.

"But if you are curious, then…" Mahiru scooped up a spoonful and held it out to him, with the handle turned his way.

Amane only stared at it, making no move to take it.

"Wow, you're seriously chickening out," Chitose commented.

"After what she just told me, who *wouldn't*?" Amane shot back.

"Me. This is easy peasy for me."

"Don't expect me to have your spice tolerance." Even as he snapped at Chitose, Amane's eyes stayed locked on the mapo tofu.

He's probably going to eat it, Mahiru decided, rising to her feet. She slipped into the kitchen to fetch him something to drink. She had, anticipating this very situation, bought a bottle of yogurt. As she poured it, she glanced back toward the living room. Sure enough, Amane had steeled himself and taken a cautious bite from her portion.

The next moment, his hand flew to his mouth.

Even from the kitchen, Mahiru could see the confusion written all over his face. It wasn't disgust, so he didn't find it bad, but the sharp tremors running through his body screamed of sheer heat. He wasn't writhing in agony, so it wasn't unbearable…but it was close.

"I feel like I'm gonna cry…"

Amane somehow managed to swallow it down and croaked out the words in a frail voice.

Chitose took this chance to mock him. "Breaking news! First-ever glimpse of Amane in tears!? This shocking photo says it all!"

"Don't you *dare* take one."

"No dice, huh?"

"Obviously not, and no I'm not crying either."

"When you're not used to spicy food, the heat and numbing feeling pretty much drown everything out until all you taste is salt." Mahiru returned from the kitchen and handed him the glass. "Here, Amane-kun—drink this yogurt. I'm not positive it will help with the numbness, though."

"You're a lifesaver…" He didn't hesitate for a second and downed it in one go.

Was it really that bad for him…? Mahiru thought, more bewildered than disheartened as the cook.

"Fwaaah." Amane drained the whole glass and finally let out a long breath, as if his soul had been returned to him. Sweat dotted his forehead, proof that even a single bite had thrown his body into overdrive.

"Now I know for sure I can't handle it," he said.

"Called it," Chitose returned.

"If you knew, why'd you try to make me eat it?"

"Because I wanted to share something delicious with you."

"It's not like I'd magically be able to handle it… Still, it sucks that I can't appreciate how good it is."

Amane's shoulders slumped in disappointment. Mahiru couldn't help finding the sight a little adorable, though she was sure he'd be annoyed if she ever said so aloud.

Instead, she simply offered him a gentle smile. "Everyone has things they can't handle, so there's no use brooding over it. You enjoyed the regular mapo tofu, didn't you?"

"Of course."

"Then that's all that matters."

Mahiru didn't think they had to be the same. Each of them could simply choose what suited them best, and if something didn't work out, that was fine. It only meant their tastes differed. What mattered was respecting each other's preferences, not forcing one to change to match the other.

"Come on, let's eat before it gets cold. I'm sure even the mapo tofu wants to be enjoyed while it's still hot. Delicious food should be eaten while it tastes best."

She gave Amane's back a light pat, and though it was barely a touch, he jolted as if nudged forward, replying in a much lighter voice, "Yeah, you're right."

Smiling at him once more, Mahiru picked up her chopsticks and returned to her meal.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Though Mahiru had served her a generous portion, Chitose effortlessly cleaned her bowl, and was now leaning back with a deeply satisfied smile.

"Whew, I'm stuffed. Thanks for the meal," she said as she rubbed her stomach.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. My food being finished is the greatest reward I could ask for as the cook."

Chitose hardly had any dislikes when it came to food, and she ate with both hearty enthusiasm and delicate care, leaving not even a scrap behind. For the chef, that was both gratifying and a joy to see.

"Because it's so good! I wanna eat this every day!" Chitose exclaimed.

"That's my personal privilege, so no," Amane shot her down.

"Oh my! Did you hear that, dear wife?" Chitose teased with a sly grin, making Mahiru's shoulders draw in with embarrassment.

Amane probably didn't mean anything by it, but what he said reminded Mahiru of her conversation with Koyuki, leaving her no choice but to stay quiet and try to keep her fluster from showing.

Whether he noticed her silent struggle or not, Amane stacked everyone's dishes neatly on a tray and rose to his feet. "Well then, our guest should have a nice chat with the chef. I'll take care of cleaning up."

"Huh? But I should also—" Mahiru began.

"No you won't. Don't take my job from me."

"Exactly, Mahirun. You never give yourself a chance to relax, and that's how you wear yourself out. If Amane says he's going to handle it, you should let him."

Curiously, Chitose urged Mahiru to show some restraint this time.

She sprawled comfortably on the sofa then beckoned Mahiru over with a gleeful, "C'mere!"

"But…" Mahiru hesitated, only for Amane to add, "Good going, Chitose. Hold her there for me," practically egging her on. He had no intention of letting Mahiru lift a finger.

At that point, Mahiru knew if she followed him into the kitchen, he'd only shoo her back out. "Goodness me…" She voiced her lone complaint with a tiny sigh before settling down beside Chitose.

Amane glanced over at them, satisfied, then carried the dishes off to the sink.

"He really has gotten so dependable, hasn't he?" Chitose watched how Amane acted and let out the thought with a touch of nostalgia.

"Hehe, he's completely different from how he used to be, isn't he?" Mahiru agreed.

"I heard from Ikkun that his room used to be a total disaster."

"Well, yes…it was."

The sound of running water drifted in from the kitchen, stirring memories from more than a year ago.

Back when they had first met, Amane's room had been so messy that there was no way to put a polite spin on it.

Freshly washed clothes lay scattered across the living room floor. Magazines were stacked haphazardly, or else tossed around like confetti. The desk was littered with unused chopsticks and disposable spoons, while school handouts were shoved into a box in such a careless jumble that it was unlikely he'd ever even glanced at them.

If there was one saving grace, it was that he'd at least managed to deal with food waste properly. Apparently, his common sense had kicked in just enough to realize letting garbage pile up would invite cockroaches. There were no gnats or pests to be found. He was just a textbook example of someone utterly incapable of tidying up.

"Was it a pigsty?" Chitose guessed.

"Pig…sty… Well, I'd say it just barely counted as 'not cleaned up,' maybe…?"

"So basically, just a total mess."

"The one ounce of praise I can give is that he didn't let food waste pile up."

"Whew, good. Just barely still tolerable, then."

"Just so you know, I can hear every word. I won't deny it, though, because all that's true." Amane shot them a flat glare, sponge and plate still in hand.

Apparently their voices easily carried to the kitchen.

Mahiru met his glare head-on. "We were only talking about your

growth. We weren't badmouthing you. If you took it as an insult, then maybe take a moment to reflect on your past habits."

"*Urk…* I know, but still…"

Amane's lips clamped shut after that jab, leaving him unable to argue.

Chitose burst out laughing. "And yet, look at you now."

"Within about half a year, you could handle nearly everything with ease," Mahiru added. "And your cooking improved rapidly once you got into it."

No one understood better than Mahiru how Amane was the type to get things done when he set his mind to it.

At first, he hadn't been able to cook or clean, and Mahiru had honestly wondered how someone like that could even live on their own. But once she began teaching him earnestly, Amane learned just as earnestly in return. Little by little, the things he couldn't do before became things he could handle with confidence.

The room that had once been a disaster zone, he now kept tidy without her guidance. His cooking had reached the point where, with a recipe, he could make nearly anything. His natural attentiveness had only sharpened, letting him care not only for her condition but his own as well.

On top of that, somewhere along the way, he had awakened to self-improvement. He focused effort into his studies, working out, and even grooming himself. Amane was now a far cry from the boy she had first met, yet he remained just as kind and sincere.

"Let's be real. If I'd spent half a year under your supervision and hadn't improved at all, that'd just mean I had zero learning ability," Amane stated.

"You've grown way more than I expected…in more ways than one," Mahiru added.

"Like his muscles?" Chitose interjected.

"Now even you're teasing me about that, Chitose-san…"

"Yeeeah, I mean, you've got a real potent Amane fetish, after all."

Amane heard what Chitose said and replied, "It's less of a fetish and more that she's just crazy in love with me."

"Oho? Someone's awfully confident."

"What can I say? It's true she loves me."

Amane dropped that line as casually as if he were sipping tea, which left Mahiru burning with embarrassment instead.

She was glad that he recognized her feelings, that all the times she had told him so had sunk in. But hearing it said right there, in front of her, still made her feel more shy than delighted.

"You've really grown up, havent'cha? Lost that *cute side* you used to have," Chitose continued from the living area.

"I never had a 'cute side' to begin with. And seriously, you were the one kicking me to be more honest. Why make fun of me now that I finally am?"

"Because *love*."

"Pretty twisted kind of love, if you ask me. I could do without it," Amane muttered sourly, still focused on the dishes.

Chitose just laughed. "Well, the only love you desire is Mahirun's, right?"

Mahiru couldn't say anything. Her body only shrunk in on itself, and warmth surged through her in ways that even the spicy dinner could not.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

Since Chitose was staying over at Mahiru's place tonight, Mahiru and Chitose left Amane's apartment a little earlier than usual and headed next door, where they took their time getting ready and soaking in a relaxing bath.

They had school the next day, so staying up late wasn't an option. That's why they'd started preparing early. But since they bathed separately, it still took a decent amount of time. By the time they'd finished getting everything ready, it was only a little earlier than their usual bedtime.

Chitose often stayed over at Mahiru's house, so she was used to the routine. Dressed in the matching loungewear they'd bought before, she sat down beside Mahiru on the bed, casually doing some light stretches.

"It's been a while since I last stayed over at your place, Mahirun. It feels like it's been forever. Your bed's so soft and comfy—I love it."

"I believe quality bedding is a worthy expense. After all, the body is our most important asset."

“You care a lot about that kinda stuff, don’t you?”

“I do. I was taught that once you damage your body, it’s not so easy to recover.”

That particular piece of wisdom came from Koyuki. She always emphasized that anything that touched or entered your body should be of good quality. The impact might not be obvious right away, but it would show over time. When you’re young, you can get away with more, but once you get older, the difference becomes clear. Mahiru had found herself nodding in agreement back then, genuinely impressed.

So while she didn’t go so far as to seek out top-of-the-line luxury items, she did make sure to choose things that suited her and felt comfortable to use. Her bed, for example, was large enough to spread out on and designed to distribute pressure evenly, making it both supportive and cozy. The same care went into her choice of pillow.

Mahiru was confident in her decisions when it came to comfort, and Chitose gave her an approving nod and a warm smile.

“That person who taught you must’ve cared about you a whole lot.”

“I’d like to believe she did.”

“You should be more confident about that! …Hey, is it all right if I ask about the person who raised you?”

“Of course.”

Come to think of it, Mahiru had never really told Chitose much about Koyuki.

She’d mentioned that Koyuki was her stand-in guardian who had taken care of her, but she’d never gone into detail about what kind of person she was or how she had looked after Mahiru. There had been a time when just touching on the subject of parents made Mahiru uneasy, thanks to everything with her biological ones. And Chitose, being thoughtful in her own way, had never asked Mahiru about her past. Naturally, that meant she’d never had much of a reason to bring Koyuki up.

But now, here they were. Chitose had been helping her prepare a photo to send to Koyuki, making time to be with her and their friends to create fond memories together.

And so, Mahiru didn’t even consider the idea of keeping it all to herself.

Not when it came to Chitose.

"What kind of person is she?"

"Let's see… She is the kind of person who could do absolutely anything. Honestly, I don't think I ever saw her fail at something before."

To Mahiru, Koyuki was the ideal image of a grown woman. She was ever so gentle, composed, and deeply considerate. She handled every task you might expect from a housekeeper flawlessly, all while paying genuine attention to Mahiru's needs and feelings.

Maybe it helped that Koyuki had experience raising children older than Mahiru, but even so, her level of competence was almost uncanny. She could do anything, teach anything, and seemed to know everything one would need to survive in this world. It was hard not to wonder who she really was.

Mahiru knew that it had been her biological mother who arranged for Koyuki's care, and that her background and credentials must've been thoroughly vetted to avoid any further complications. Mahiru had never once doubted her. Not her character, not her past.

"So basically, she's like the fully upgraded version of you?" Chitose wondered.

"At the very least, she is something like a higher-spec model, yes."

"Why are you belittling yourself? Don't do that. Sheesh."

"You're the one who said it first, Chitose-san."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry."

Chitose threw her arms around her in a tight hug, and Mahiru let her do as she pleased. Her thoughts drifted back to a time when she had experienced happiness equal to the loneliness she had once known.

Back then, Mahiru had been desperate to earn her parents' love, to be noticed by them. She'd tried so hard to earn their affection. In the end, that wish never came true. But even so, she didn't believe those days had been completely meaningless.

At the very least, she'd been cherished by Koyuki. Through her, Mahiru had learned how a person should live—and what it truly meant to love and be loved in return.

"She is…a truly wonderful person who taught me so many things."

“Didn’t she teach you how to cook?”

“Yes. She taught me how to cook all kinds of dishes. But not just that. She also taught me basic manners, everyday common sense, how to study, even how to carry myself. I learned so much from her.”

“So, in a way, the version of you we all know today wouldn’t exist without her.”

“That’s right. Without her, I would not have become the person I am now. And honestly…had she not been there, I might have even taken my own life. She supported me that much.”

But what if? What if the housekeeper assigned to Mahiru had not been Koyuki, but someone else? Someone who simply did their job and left, without ever reaching out to Mahiru? That might have been the right approach from a professional standpoint, but it would have done nothing to save Mahiru.

Left without a reliable teacher, ignorant of even basic manners, knowing nothing of love, Mahiru would have grown up all alone, not even knowing what it meant to live alongside others. And eventually, she might’ve given up on life altogether.

It was the worst possible ending, one she could not even bear to imagine. An ending that now, in this moment, could never, ever happen. The only reason that future never came to pass was because Koyuki had been there. For that, Mahiru could never thank her enough.

“So she took great care of you, and you love her lots because of that.”

“Of course… She’s like a parent to me. I do want to repay her someday, but at the same time, I’m not her real daughter. I don’t think it’s right for me to involve myself too much in her private life.”

Now she lived together with her child and their spouse, which made it difficult for Mahiru to visit easily, especially with the distance between them. Mahiru didn’t even know how Koyuki’s children felt about her. For all she knew, they might find her nothing but a nuisance. That thought left her with no choice but to keep her distance.

Chitose heard this and said, “You worry too much about what other people think,” then gave Mahiru an awkward smile. “Hmm…but honestly, you won’t know for sure unless you actually ask her, will you? It’s not

something you or I can just assume."

"…You're right."

Of course she was right. No one could ever really know what another person was thinking. Unless you could somehow peek into their heart or they chose to tell you themselves, any amount of guessing would remain just that—mere guesses. People couldn't completely understand someone else's feelings. Simple as it sounded, it was the truth.

"Well, if you really want to repay her, why not wait until you're an adult to think about how?"

"An adult…"

"'Cause let's be real, we're still just kids. Kids try to do a bunch of stuff, but parents probably just want them to focus on themselves first. We're at the stage of life where we can barely keep our heads above water just managing our own stuff. Once we become third years, we'll be doing university exam prep, won't we? It's nice to want to repay someone, but there's also money, circumstances…all that to think about. If you can't even take care of yourself yet, then it makes no sense to try and lend a hand to someone else."

Mahiru was left speechless by Chitose's blunt, matter-of-fact reasoning. Then Chitose gave her a playful wink.

What she'd said was right. If Mahiru tried to do something for Koyuki now, Koyuki would almost certainly refuse. In fact, she'd probably scold her gently and say, *"Take care of yourself first."*

"I see you've become quite realistic now, Chitose-san."

"Wow, you act like I always had my head in the clouds. Meanie!"

"I'm sorry, that's not at all what I meant."

"I know, I know… But yeah, in your case, Mahirun, I don't think you'll have much to worry about in the future. You've got Amane with you, after all. You'll be a dual-income household, which should be more than enough to get by."

Chitose said that so casually, so naturally, that it made Mahiru freeze on the spot.

What Chitose meant by *"dual-income household"* was clear enough—it was the phrase used to describe a household with both partners working.

And the fact that she'd mentioned Amane right alongside her meant only one thing: even in Chitose's eyes, the two of them already looked like they were heading toward a future of marriage together.

The future I dream of…

A future where their love was given tangible form. Where their bond was made official, where they shared the same name and walked through life together. It was a dream she had wished for more times than she could count.

Her cheeks burned hot at just the thought, and her heart pounded with such vigor she could feel her blood rushing to every corner of her body.

"*Oh ho?*"

Chitose noticed Mahiru acting weirdly, looked at her again, then broke into a wide, mischievous grin.

"Nyeh heh heh, you imagined it just now, didn't you? Shooo kyute!"

Chitose slyly raised her phone, to which Mahiru smacked her lightly on the thigh.

"…Please don't take any pictures," she warned.

"This one's just for mee~!"

"That makes it even worse!"

Chitose then turned the screen toward her with a grin. It was pitch black. Not even the lock screen was showing, which proved it had all been a joke.

"Anyway, don't worry that much about it, Mahirun. Just sending a simple message like 'I'm really happy right now' would already be more than enough of a thank-you."

"…I'm trying to do just that by asking you to take pictures for me."

"Oh yeah. Whoops, my mistake."

Chitose laughed in amusement, and Mahiru let out a soft sigh.

"Geez."

Her face, however, stayed relaxed, her smile lingering as she gently teased Chitose in return. Then she wrapped her arms around her, struck by how fortunate she was to have such a wonderful friend.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“Man, they took tons of pictures.”

On his next day off, Amane and Mahiru hurried home after school to review all the photos that had been taken. The two of them sat down in the living room and huddled together over a single smartphone.

Over the course of a week, Chitose and their other friends had taken countless photos. And now, seeing them all collected in one place, the sheer number was staggering. There were so many that the scroll bar had shrunk down to a tiny speck.

Judging by the thumbnails, they’d taken all kinds of photos. There were some of Mahiru and Amane together, some with only one of them, and even some group pictures of everyone hanging out.

Side by side, the two of them browsed through Chitose and the others’ hard-earned work, each photo sparking memories of everything they’d experienced during that week.

“Dang, this takes up a lot of storage… Just how many did they take?” Amane wondered, amazed.

“They were very enthusiastic, after all. This one of you is adorable.”

On the screen was a photo of Mahiru feeding Amane a crepe, his face flushed red with embarrassment. The moment he saw it, the memory came rushing back, and he immediately pulled a sour face.

“Uh, I can’t really take ‘adorable’ as a compliment.”

“Why not?”

“…Well, I can. But only if it’s from you.”

“You really are sweet to me, Amane-kun.”

“Took you long enough to notice.”

It was a little odd for Mahiru to admit it herself—since she was the one being spoiled—but Amane genuinely was especially indulgent with her. He almost never got angry unless something truly serious happened, and he was so tolerant that she sometimes wondered if it was really all right for him to let her have her way so much.

Still, she knew that very softness was simply proof of how much he

loved her. Far from feeling guilty, she could only feel cherished. And because Amane was someone who would draw a firm line and say no when it truly mattered, she had no reason to feel uneasy about being loved as much as she was.

The way he can make that distinction is one of the things I love about him, Mahiru thought fondly.

She leaned against his side, and the two of them slowly retraced the memories of the past week as they sat together. *"Oh, this was when…" "Then after that, we…"*

They had captured all sorts of moments: everyone digging into Amane's homemade lunch together; Amane looking smug after losing every ball game to Yuuta but easily getting first place in darts; Mahiru fumbling over and over at the crane game; the group gathered earnestly around a desk to study; even Amane, at Ayaka's prompting, scooping Mahiru up in his arms like a princess after Itsuki boasted that he'd been making sure Amane stayed in shape.

The more Mahiru looked, the more she was struck by how Chitose and Itsuki never seemed to miss a perfect shot. As she scrolled slowly through the gallery, a photo dated only recently caught her eye.

It was a photo of her and Amane with the sun setting in front of them.

Their faces weren't clearly visible, since the shot had been taken from behind. Only their profiles were faintly outlined in the glow of the setting sun. Yet their expressions came through. Their looks were so serene, so full of happiness that Mahiru found herself wondering, *When did I ever make that face?*

Their hands were linked as always, and their shadows leaned close together as if in embrace. The picture carried a touch of nostalgia, yet it only depicted a common moment of their life. For Mahiru, it captured nothing less than her own ordinary, irreplaceable happiness.

“When did she even manage to take this?” Amane muttered, baffled.

Mahiru remembered that Chitose had slipped behind them after they’d held hands, so she must have snapped it then. The composition was so perfect that, for a second, it almost looked like the work of a professional.

Mahiru found herself staring at the photo, its beauty striking her at once and leaving a lasting impression. And as she gazed at it, Amane quietly reached over and took her idle hand into his own.

“You know Koyuki-san’s address, right?”

“Why are you asking all of a sudden? Of course—I made sure to write it down. If she’d moved, she would have contacted me, so I believe she’s still there.”

“Awesome. I just thought, you know…sending the photos as-is feels like a waste when we’ve got so many good ones.”

Amane’s eyes, too, lingered on the picture. He was also caught by its charm.

“I was thinking it might be nicer to print them out and put together an album. Sure, sending them digitally works, but it feels a little impersonal. If we add decorations or little notes here and there, it would be more colorful and a lot more fun to look through.”

The concept of an *“album”* didn’t hold much familiarity for Mahiru.

Her parents had never spared her a glance, let alone taken photos. She had no momentos, no keepsakes, no memories captured in pictures. For her, albums had always belonged to a distant world.

But now, she would make one with Amane.

“Oh, of course, if you’re not comfortable with it, we can just send her the digital versions instead.”

Amane waved his hands quickly, flustered. He must have caught the brief shadow that crossed Mahiru’s face and thought she disliked the idea. But that wasn’t it at all. To make sure he understood, Mahiru met his gaze and gave him a gentle smile.

“Oh, no… It’s just that I’ve never made or had an album before at home. So…I’d like to give it a try.”

“Gotcha. Then let’s make two: one to send, and one to keep as a memento.”

“Okay.”

Without being overbearing or inconsiderate, Amane continued to speak in his usual tender voice as gentle as the spring night breeze. And as Mahiru listened, she felt once again how much she loved how he did this, and her smile deepened even more.

“All right then, let’s rope everyone into helping and put something nice together,” Amane suggested.

“Something nice? What’s that supposed to mean?” Mahiru giggled.

“Don’t expect me to have any sense for this stuff… We’ll just pool everyone’s best ideas together and make something that will last as both a keepsake and a memory.”

“Okay.”

My very own album… What a sweet, enticing ring those words had.

This would be Mahiru’s first album. And surely, it wouldn’t be the last. It would just be one of many more to come.

Just the thought alone spread a blissful warmth through her chest, and filled her with a joy so sweet it nearly swept her away. She tried to hold it in, but couldn’t, and a smile broke across her face as she nestled against Amane’s arm. Amane answered her with an identical serene, gentle smile, and gave a small nod.

The Sides Known Only to One Another

To Mahiru, her boyfriend Amane was easy to read—but apparently, not everyone felt the same.

Once, a boy had come up to her and said, *"I don't get what you see in that gloomy guy. You can't even tell what he's thinking."*

Mahiru had almost wanted to ask how anyone could judge someone as transparent as Amane unreadable.

The reason was simple: Amane had never spared that boy a single thought. He probably didn't even know his name, so of course his expression never changed around him. If one indifferent glance was all it took for the boy to decide Amane was a gloomy, hard-to-read guy, then that only showed how shallow his judgment really was.

To Mahiru, Amane was easy to read—or to be exact, he was tremendously straightforward when it came to her. His feelings showed plainly in his expressions and the way he acted around her.

When they'd first met, his blunt way of speaking and perpetually sour expression had certainly stood out, yet not once had Mahiru found him hard to read. His eyes had always been kind, and he'd treated her with respect, never letting even a hint of malice show. And whenever she asked what he was thinking, he'd answer her honestly and without hesitation. So really, he'd never been difficult to understand at all.

Now, he'd grown so expressive that Mahiru could often read his feelings without having to ask. He still kept the deeper parts of himself for those closest to him, but even in ordinary moments, his expressions had softened. The warding thorns he once carried were gone, replaced by a warm, approachable atmosphere.

Like, it shows all over his face.

What does, you ask? That he's head over heels for Mahiru—that's what.

Not that it was so blatant anyone on the street would notice, of course. But even then, the way Amane looked at her was always soft and full of warmth. That alone was enough for people to call him easy to read. And when it was just the two of them, that gentleness deepened into something far sweeter—something that couldn't even be compared to the expression he wore in public.

Who was it, again, that said he always looked sour?

Amane himself might've believed it, but really, that was nothing but nonsense.

peek

Mahiru stole a glance at Amane, who sat across from her, quietly working his way through a reference book. The sweet expression he always reserved for her was nowhere to be seen. His eyes were fixed on the pages before him, his face calm and composed as his mechanical pencil moved steadily across the paper.

He didn't notice her gaze at all. Every bit of his focus was poured into the task at hand, his eyes never once straying from the text. Naturally, there was nothing soft or gentle about his expression while he studied.

The sight made Mahiru stifle a chuckle. *Anyone who only saw this expression might say he is cold or distant*, she mused.

But then Amane looked up from his books, noticing her laugh. The curiosity in his wide, earnest eyes, paired with that quietly gentle face, left her feeling a little warm inside. It was such a striking contrast to the cool, composed look he'd worn only seconds ago.

"Something wrong?" he asked her.

"No, nothing. I'm just watching you while I take a break."

"You're watching me? Uh, you do realize I'm not exactly a sight for sore eyes, right?"

They'd been studying for quite a while, so Amane seemed to take her words as a cue to pause. With a soft laugh, he slipped his mechanical pencil back into its case.

There wasn't a hint of that supposed *"sourness"* in his smile.

“You are one for *my* sore eyes.”

“Right… And are you enjoying yourself?”

“Very much so.”

“I see. Fair enough, then.”

Mahiru was sure he could have come up with a dozen witty remarks, but that since she insisted she was enjoying it, he let it slide. Instead, Amane simply looked at her with a gentle expression—one so warm and tender it was a face he showed only to her.

…If anyone else saw the face he was making now, they’d probably be stunned.

It was an expression Amane never intended—nor wanted—to show to anyone but Mahiru. A smile so soft it melted away any trace of his past bluntness. Every last bit of it belonged to her, and her alone.

“You really do love watching me, don’t you? This isn’t the first time, either.”

“I do… Your expression completely changes when you’re looking at me, and it’s so different that I never get tired of seeing it. Honestly, just watching you look at me is enough. I could never get bored of it.”

“Wait, seriously? It changes *that* much?”

“It changes *that* much. If you don’t believe me, ask Akazawa-san.”

Itsuki would no doubt be thrilled to point out every tiny difference between Amane’s usual self and the way he acted around her—grinning smugly the whole time, of course, right up until Amane put him in a headlock. But if Itsuki ever dropped the teasing and answered seriously, Mahiru could easily imagine Amane sulking, too embarrassed to argue back.

When Amane was with Itsuki, he was a different person. More playful, more at ease, he was just an ordinary boy enjoying his time with a close friend. Mahiru sometimes found herself a little envious of that side of him…though she knew that was a feeling best kept to herself.

“…He’d just make fun of me if I asked.”

“He might just give you that funny little grin, you know?”

“That’s what ticks me off.”

Amane pressed his lips together in mock irritation, though there wasn’t

the slightest hint of real frustration in his face. If anything, he just looked like he was sulking.

Mahiru found the expression he gave to Itsuki endearing. It showed how close he and Itsuki really were, how much Amane valued him. Watching that warmth between them filled her chest with affection—and, if she were honest, a tiny bit of envy.

He's so cute…

Maybe he'd picked up on what she was thinking, because he suddenly made a sulky face—though this time, it wasn't quite the same as the one he showed Itsuki.

Mahiru couldn't hold back her giggle.

"…Mahiru, are you laughing at me?"

"No, I'm not. But if you're that worried about being teased, doesn't that mean you know you make different expressions depending on who you're with?"

"…Mahiru, the way you say that—"

"Do you hate it?"

"No."

"Not even a little?"

"No."

With an adorable pout, Amane turned his face away and retreated to the sofa behind him. Realizing she might've pushed him a bit too far, Mahiru stood up, circled around the low table, slipped down beside him, and then wrapped her arms around his.

"I'm sorry. I only laughed because it made me happy to realize you save those special expressions just for me."

"You should know you're special to me by now, Mahiru."

"Hehe, yes, I really should."

Even without hearing the words, Mahiru could always feel from Amane's actions and expressions that she was the most important person in his world. Still, he never left it to actions alone—he always made sure to say it out loud, too, doing everything he could to keep her from ever feeling uncertain. The fact that he showed his feelings in every way he could was incredibly reassuring for her.

Showing how you felt through gestures or unspoken affection was important, but too many people made the mistake of thinking that was enough, forgetting how vital it was to say what was in their heart.

Amane, though, showed his love with his whole being, and never in a way that felt forced or overwhelming. That thoughtfulness once again made Mahiru think one thing.

Truly, I am glad I fell for this man.

Falling for her lover's personality all over again, Mahiru leaned her head against his well-toned, steady arm and felt him let out a soft sigh, followed by a smile he couldn't hold back. The sound drew a quiet laugh from her in return.

She didn't even need to look to know he was smiling—but she did anyway. When she lifted her head, her eyes met his, and she found him gazing at her with the same soft warmth reflected in his expression.

His smile was gentler than ever, overflowing with such tenderness that anyone who saw it would understand instantly. And as that warmth seemed to spill over to her, Mahiru's cheeks bloomed a rosy red.

…He really does love me, doesn't he?

Mahiru knew Amane probably wasn't trying to send that message on purpose—but that was exactly what made it feel so genuine.

It was a look meant for no one else. Sweet and gentle, brimming with deep affection, like he was cherishing her just by watching her. If she kept meeting his gaze, she felt as though her whole body would melt into goo, every bit of her strength slipping away under the warmth of it.

She quickly turned her eyes aside—and in response, Amane's quiet laugh got louder, his warm breath brushing against her as he smiled.

"Your cheeks are red."

"They're just…warm."

"I bet. You're definitely burning up."

With one arm still loosely around her, Amane brushed his fingertips along Mahiru's cheek with the other. A faint spark of heat flickered in his eyes.

The warmth slowly spreading through Mahiru's body had to be the same one burning within him.

His fingers slid from her cheek down to her chin. His touch, which felt more yearning than playful, sent a shiver through her, and her gaze fell. Just then, his fingers gave the slightest tremble, and she caught the soft sound of his breath slip.

"…You look like you're yearning for something."

"Y-yearning for what…?"

"A kiss, maybe? Or a hug?"

"…You've gotten *way* too comfortable saying things like that, Amane-kun."

"Wouldn't it be weirder if I stayed a shy coward forever?"

So he said—but Mahiru knew better. Whenever Amane reached out to her with romantic intent, he almost always averted his eyes. Every touch was careful, deliberate, and just a little hesitant. There was still a boyish innocence in him during those moments, and that was something only Mahiru truly understood. She suspected he'd start pouting if she ever pointed it out, though, so she kept that thought to herself.

"By the way…would it have been okay if I kissed you just now?" he asked.

"…What's *not* okay is asking me that so directly."

Amane blinked, clearly surprised by her answer.

He always did his best to put Mahiru's feelings first, so he made a point of asking before taking any step forward. But sometimes, he was so completely Mahiru-first that it made her worry he might be neglecting what he wanted.

It was selfish of her; she knew that. Still, there were moments when she wished he'd just act on his own—without asking, without hesitation. She knew full well that this was contradictory and self-centered.

Amane froze for a second, his innocent eyes widening with surprise. Then, slowly, his dark eyes narrowed, and his lips curved into a different kind of smile.

In an instant, that boyish innocence vanished, and a sweet allure that coated his handsome features took its place.

The change was so sudden that Mahiru didn't even have time to catch her breath. Her voice caught in her throat—and then, all she could see before her was him.

She squeezed her eyes shut on reflex. What she felt next was the firm yet tender press of his lips against hers. She didn't need to open her eyes to know. When she drew in a breath, the familiar scent of her beloved filled

her lungs—calm, refreshing, yet somehow sweet enough to make her head swim. It spread through her, sinking so deep it felt like it reached her very core.

It wasn't usually like this. His kisses didn't normally leave her dizzy or weak. But this time, with just that single, feather-light touch, all the strength seemed to drain from her body.

Then, Amane slowly pulled away.

Even though she could tell he wanted her and had the means with which he could indulge on a far deeper level, he never forced any of that onto her.

His eyes burned bright as he gazed at her. But it wasn't lewd desire that fuelled them. It was reason.

Slowly, he murmured, "Can we keep going…just a little more?"

"…It's so like you to ask for only a *little* more."

"If you're okay with *a lot* more, I won't say no—but honestly, I don't think either of us would last."

He didn't need to spell it out. Mahiru already knew what he meant. They were standing at the edge of a line that, once crossed, couldn't easily be undone. If she ever reached her limit, Amane would stop without question. But if she said nothing—if she accepted his touch and let things continue—he likely wouldn't stop until they were right on that edge.

And yet, strangely enough…that thought didn't frighten her.

Maybe she had lost her head in the heat of the moment. Because feeling his love laid bare…feeling how he desired her, wholly, in both body and soul…brought her no fear.

Amane's gaze swept over her, his eyes fuelled by a now stronger emotion.

The faint curve of his lips was so sensual it sent her heart leaping in her chest.

"Or…do you prefer the sweet torment of being left wanting more?"

Slowly, Amane traced a line along her neck with his fingertip, sending shivers racing down her spine. The touch was too delicate—enough to make her tremble and ache for more.

Mahiru tried to speak, but no words came. Her throat refused to form a single sound; only soft, breathy gasps slipped past her lips.

And perhaps even those faint, airy sounds were too precious for Amane to let go—because right after, she felt his warmth envelop her completely.

Her eyes fluttered shut as his heat sank into her. She couldn't close her lips in time—but even if she could have, she wouldn't have wanted to. Deep down, she yearned for more of him.

Slowly but surely, Amane drew her deeper into his world, easing away her shyness that made her shrink and squirm. He already knew she wasn't resisting—he was simply waiting for her to show that she wanted him too.

A sweet, syrupy sound escaped her lips, a voice she would never have made under any other circumstance. But before she could feel any embarrassment, her body was made to feel Amane's warmth as it seeped deep into her. A tantalizing, tingling heat etched itself into her aching core, scattering until her entire body felt flushed.

By the time their lips finally parted, Mahiru's heart was pounding wildly, sending waves of that sweet, dizzying ache pulsing through every inch of her.

"This…still counts as *a little more* to me…but what do you think?"

Amane held Mahiru close, her body soft and pliant in his arms. His lips, still damp with both of their fluids, curved into a loose smile as he met her blurry and unfocused eyes.

Mahiru knew all too well that, to Amane, this truly was *just a little more.* Even so…being toyed with so mercilessly was almost more than she could bear.

"…I do believe…there's such a thing as *restraint*," she murmured.

"I thought I was holding back quite a bit, too."

He wasn't wrong. Amane could have kissed her deeper, let his hands drift lower, or pushed her down onto the sofa and taken things further. But he hadn't. He had only pressed his lips to hers to share their warmth, nothing more.

He had done it out of care for her, and Mahiru understood that. She appreciated his decision…she truly did. But even so, she couldn't help wishing he'd also remember that she still wasn't used to moments like this. They might have shared the same number of experiences, but Amane always seemed more skilful in guiding the moment, likely due to how

perceptive he was when it came to her. He saw what she needed and could adapt accordingly.

…It's so unfair how he can do that.

Even when Mahiru was already at her limit, Amane still had the composure to pull back. He watched her carefully to accommodate her feelings, even though he was the one who wanted to keep going.

"…Did you not like it?" he asked quietly.

"You *perv*."

"A perv, huh."

"You're a perv."

"Guess I'm a perv now…"

It might've sounded like Mahiru was scolding him, but Amane didn't seem remotely offended. If anything, he looked a little too pleased with himself. Mahiru could not believe this man.

"Mahiru…do you hate it when I'm a perv?"

"That's such an unfair way to ask that…"

"But if you really didn't like it, I'd stop…but maybe not *entirely*—I don't think I could—but I'd definitely try to be more careful."

Even though he already knew she loved every side of him, Amane still made a point of asking. Mahiru had the feeling it was his quiet way of teasing her back.

He surely already knew the answer. And yet, he still watched her with expectant eyes—proof enough that there was plenty of passion left in him.

"…What matters is that you stay true to yourself, Amane-kun. And, um…I'm not saying I dislike it when you act that way. It makes me happy, actually… As long as you only do it with me…then I don't mind at all."

"You really think I could ever be like this with anyone else?"

Amane took her hand, guiding it gently to rest against his chest. A faint smile crossed his lips, as if to say, *"See? You should know the answer better than anyone."*

Even without Amane saying a word, his heartbeat said everything.

Feeling the strong, steady rhythm beneath her palm, Mahiru tried to steady her own, which was racing just as fast. Her breath came quiet and shallow, and her cheeks faintly flushed as she slowly lifted her gaze to meet

his.

"You love me very much, don't you?"

"Of course. Bit late to be realizing that, though."

"…I was just taking the feeling to heart."

"Well, I'm glad it's finally hitting you."

There was no way Mahiru could ever doubt his love—not when Amane expressed it with every part of himself. After being enveloped time and time again by his tenderness and devotion, there was nothing left for her to question. If anything, she sometimes felt he might love her *too* much. Amane respected her deeply, matching her pace while still quietly longing for a little more of her each time.

"It's good that you finally get it, but…I love you more than you could possibly imagine, so I'd advise you not to test me too much," he added.

"What happens if I do?"

"…You wanna find out now?"

Tempt him, and that was it—Amane would make sure every bit of his love reached her, using every way he knew how, short of breaking the promise they'd once made. He'd make her tremble until she begged him through tears to stop.

His words. His gaze. The heat of his body. His lips. His fingertips… Mahiru already knew just how formidable Amane's affection could be. It wasn't only tender—it could melt her down completely, until she was left a trembling, weak mess in his arms. Having experienced that firsthand already, she didn't need to imagine what might happen if she provoked him again. She already knew.

"…I'll pass, thank you," she finally said.

"Oh. A shame."

"Dummy."

Amane tried to play it off, but he also looked relieved by Mahiru's reply.

He knew that if Mahiru had said yes, he might not have been able to stop himself before things went too far. Once his switch flipped—once his restraint and longing blended together—he could turn into a wolf in every sense of the phrase.

And Mahiru knew if that happened, she wouldn't be able to resist him

either. Because deep down…she loved seeing him lose himself to the depth of his love for her.

Even now, he was losing himself just a little to the moment. Fervor shone in his jet-black eyes as they locked onto Mahiru.

It was a gaze only she could ever see. A gaze meant only for her, one threaded with love, and dyed with desire.

“Don’t show that face to anyone else, okay?” she whispered.

“I don’t plan to. It’s only for you, Mahiru.”

“Good. Please keep it that way.”

This look belongs to me alone.

Just thinking that made her chest feel hot and her body tingle, yet the idea of Amane noticing was far too embarrassing. Trying to hide it, Mahiru leaned in—softly, quietly—and pressed her lips to his. This time, she was the one who closed the distance.

Always Share What You Love

Amane had hobbies, but he'd never been the type to devote himself entirely to just one. The only real exception was his love for Mahiru—though calling that a hobby would be absurd. His feelings for her weren't something that merely tipped the scales; they'd blown straight through them, sending the whole thing crashing to the floor. If he ever described that as a pastime, people would look at him like he'd lost it—and Mahiru would probably turn beet red and bolt out of the room. What he felt for her was too intense, too passionate to ever be called a simple pastime.

So at the moment, there wasn't anything Amane could point to and say, *"Yeah, that's my hobby."* Still, something had recently started to capture his attention.

That *something* was…making seasoned eggs.

And no, it wasn't as simple as tossing a few boiled eggs into some sauce.

The boiling time alone changed depending on the egg, and the flavoring was its own science. Even when using the same base sauce, the taste shifted depending on the concentration, the salt level, whether or not he added dashi, and how long he let them soak. For something that sounded so simple, it proved to be surprisingly intricate.

Amane always put his heart and soul into doing things he enjoyed. And, being a self-proclaimed egg enthusiast, he'd recently taken to making seasoned eggs with an almost comical level of dedication.

That said, he wasn't reckless about it. He knew better than to churn out giant batches every day. Even if he could manage to eat them all, he could already picture Mahiru giving him that mildly exasperated look and reminding him that living on eggs alone wasn't exactly a balanced diet. So

he showed some restraint, making just a few at a time to enjoy.

Lately, he'd been experimenting, trying to see how close he could get to his personal ideal flavor using his favorite seasonings. Whenever he stumbled across a combination that hit just right, his mood soared.

Apparently, that good mood showed on his face. When he'd finished washing the dishes and came back to the sofa, Mahiru glanced up at him—not suspicious, exactly, but with that curious little tilt of her head that said she was wondering what he was so pleased about.

"…You seem a little giddy?" she asked.

"Huh? …Not really?"

Amane had nothing to hide, but still, he didn't feel the need to tell her. More than that, admitting he was this cheerful because of seasoned eggs sounded way too childish to say out loud, so he brushed it off. Unfortunately, that only seemed to make Mahiru's curiosity.

She wasn't glaring or anything, but her eyes fixed on him as she asked, "Are you sure?" gentle yet firm.

"Yeah, I'm sure. I don't think I am."

"…Really?"

"…And I'm not hiding anything, either."

Experience had long since taught Amane that trying to dodge Mahiru's questions would only dig him in deeper, so he decided to wave the white flag before things escalated.

"Then what is it?"

"Uh, well, it's really nothing major…"

"Go on."

"So, lately I've been kind of obsessed with making seasoned eggs."

"I'm aware. I noticed a container of them in the fridge."

"Right, well, I finally nailed my ideal marinade ratio. I've got a batch soaking right now. I was just imagining biting into one of those perfectly seasoned eggs that are soft and melty in the middle with a bowl of steaming rice, and…yeah, I guess I got a little excited thinking about breakfast tomorrow."

Saying it out loud made Amane feel ridiculous for getting so worked up over something so trivial, but it was still better than dancing around the

truth.

He'd prepped the eggs before Mahiru came over, which meant by morning they'd be at their absolute best. The last batch had reached peak flavor in just a day, so with this slightly tweaked recipe, he planned to enjoy them after about the same amount of time.

If he let them sit longer, the taste would deepen, and the yolks would firm up as the moisture drew out. They would turn dense and creamy, which would be delicious in their own right. But Amane preferred his yolks molten and runny, rich enough to savor on his tongue. For him, that first bite had to spill golden and silky.

"Sure, seasoned eggs go great with ramen, but nothing beats white rice if you ask me. Mind if I use the good rice we've been saving?"

The rice they ate daily was hardly second-rate—it was actually on the pricier side and tasted fantastic. But Mahiru had chosen it for everyday meals, striking that careful balance between flavor and cost. It wasn't the ultra-premium kind.

Still, even that felt a little underwhelming next to his masterpiece of seasoned eggs. For something that perfect, only the best would do.

So Amane decided it was finally time to break into the special stash they'd been saving for a worthy occasion—rice that ran several thousand yen a kilo.

"Can't I?"

"Y-you can. That's not a problem."

"Yesss! Oh—maybe I should get up early and cook it in the clay pot. The rice cooker makes great rice, but the pot just hits different."

Rice cooked in a clay pot had its own distinct character. The direct flame brought out a gentle sweetness and a depth of aroma that the rice cooker couldn't quite replicate. It let each grain stay moist and plump, which made them glisten with a glossy, almost luxurious sheen.

It wasn't that Amane was discrediting the rice cooker. When it came to convenience, it was unbeatable. But for fragrance, sweetness, and flavor, the clay pot had the upper hand. Of course, it wasn't without its downsides—you couldn't walk away from it, and if the heat or water level was even slightly off, the rice could end up ruined. Both methods had their

merits.

Thanks to Mahiru's patient lessons, Amane could now manage a respectable clay pot of rice, though he usually left it to the machine on busy days. But with her permission given, he decided that tomorrow, he'd be the one to cook.

When he turned toward her, Mahiru blinked a few times in silence before letting out a long, deliberate sigh.

"…I feel very relieved right now."

"Huh? Wait, were you suspecting I was doing something weird?"

"No, nothing like that. It's more…a sense of reassurance, I suppose. Seeing you act so completely like yourself puts me at ease."

"…Why do I feel like you're secretly making fun of me?"

"I'm nooot!" Mahiru pouted.

"Hmm."

Maybe she wasn't making fun of him exactly, but judging from the sparkle in her eyes, she probably found him endearing…perhaps even cute. Not that Amane was about to take those words at face value. He let it slide, and that seemed to throw her off instead.

"Why don't you believe me?" she asked, flustered.

"Well, you're just…always looking at me with that big smile of yours, so…"

"That's only because every time I see you, I'm reminded of how dear you are to me."

"Hmph… Can't argue with that. I feel the same way about you, Mahiru," Amane said with a nod.

He couldn't deny it—not after Mahiru had gone so far as to tell him he was dear to her. He often found himself quietly watching over her with the same kind of affection. It was mutual, and just knowing she felt that way about him was enough to make his heart feel light. In moments like this, yielding gracefully was the only right move.

Mahiru's cheeks flushed a delicate pink as she lowered her gaze. Whenever she got embarrassed, she usually responded in one of two ways—either by giving harmless little headbutts or playful punches, or by freezing up and trembling in place. This time, she'd apparently gone with

the latter.

This surprised Amane. “You’re blushing over that?”

“W-well, yes…”

“I’m always looking at you while thinking about how much I love you, you know.”

“I-I’m…already well aware that…you do.”

“Really? You’re sure that feeling’s getting through?”

Amane’s parents had always taught him that words and actions carried equal weight, and he’d taken that lesson to heart. He made a point of showing his feelings clearly, so Mahiru would never have any reason to doubt them.

He’d just asked if his love truly reached her—but deep down, he already knew it did. Her reactions told him everything. She noticed every bit of his affection and accepted it wholeheartedly.

“It does reach me. Lots and lots.”

“Good. That’s all I needed to hear.”

Mahiru nodded so aggressively it was almost funny, her earnestness so adorable that Amane couldn’t help but smile. Reaching out, he gently patted her head.

She accepted his touch, yet her lips wiggled a bit as if she wanted to say something but couldn’t quite bring herself to. “…Mmm.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just…letting it sink in. How much I’m loved.”

“I see. I’m glad you can really feel it.”

Amane was more than satisfied after hearing her say that—but Mahiru, on the other hand, seemed either a little displeased or simply too embarrassed by how easily he’d agreed. She let out a small groan and pressed her palms lightly against his thigh, giving him a flustered little shove.

Guess that completes the Mahiru embarrassment starter pack, Amane thought, amused. If she ever found out he’d said that, her cheeks would puff up like a pink balloon.

He gently took the hands resting on his leg and wrapped them in his own. “Come on, cheer up. We can eat the seasoned eggs together tomorrow

morning."

"…Are you sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well…didn't you say they should turn out just the way you like them?"

"I did, yeah. And that's why I want to eat them with you. Good food's meant to be shared."

Amane wasn't the kind of person who liked hoarding the things he loved.

Of course, Mahiru herself was an exception—he'd never dream of letting anyone else have her. But when it came to everything else he cherished, he'd always rather share it with the people close to him. And if that person happened to be the woman he loved, then that only made sharing all the sweeter.

There was a special kind of joy in sharing what he loved with the person dearest to him—and in watching her find it wonderful too. That alone was enough to make him happy.

And besides, with Mahiru's sharp palate, her talent in the kitchen, and her wealth of knowledge, her feedback could only help him get better. There wasn't a single reason not to share his eggs with her.

"Don't worry—I wrote the recipe down, so I can make them again anytime," Amane said.

"…That's another thing I love about you," Mahiru murmured.

"Really? Thanks."

"I love you," she whispered again.

"…Is something going on today? Did something happen?"

Mahiru had been saying *I love you* so often that Amane couldn't help feeling a little concerned, wondering if he'd done something to make her anxious. But she only swayed her flaxen hair from side to side, calm as ever, as if there was nothing in the world to worry about.

"I was just thinking how truly happy I am, from the bottom of my heart, that you are the man I love, Amane-kun."

"I'm thrilled you feel that way, and I'm the same. I'm grateful that I'm a man you can love, Mahiru."

Amane still wasn't entirely convinced he had qualities worthy of the

depth of Mahiru's love, but he kept that thought to himself. If he said it out loud, she'd no doubt glare at him before launching into one of her impassioned lectures that always sounded more like love confessions.

What he *was* certain of was that Mahiru loved him deeply and sincerely. And he wanted to be the kind of man who could return that sincerity—not just to her, but to everyone around him. Maybe that was part of why Mahiru loved him in the first place.

"…Amane-kun, you can be *sooo* oblivious sometimes. Actually, not just sometimes—pretty often."

"Uh, about what?"

"Oh, lots of things."

Mahiru turned her head away with a little sulky pout. Amane didn't press her for an answer; he knew she'd only get embarrassed and retreat. Instead, he simply ran his thumb over her hand, savoring its warmth.

The Kinds of People They Can't Stand

Amane did have Mahiru as his girlfriend, but that didn't mean he spent every waking moment with her. Mahiru had her own passions, and of course, her own circle of friends. The same went for Amane.

They often went home from school together on days Amane had no work, but not always. Today happened to be one of those days, so he had made plans to hang out with Itsuki and Yuuta after school.

Because they couldn't afford to go anywhere too expensive and had little time after class to hang out, they usually went to a karaoke place. They could get a comfortable place with reasonably-priced drinks where noone would be able to bother them.

Even though they called it a karaoke session, the singing wasn't the main appeal. After a few songs, the whole thing usually turned into a laid-back catch-up session. Not that they had much to catch up on, though, since they were all in the same class. They all already knew the big news. As a result, they instead talked about trivial topics, like whatever they were hooked on lately or random things they liked. Just casual conversations among friends.

"So I was out with Yuuta the other day, and then he got hit on like crazy out of nowhere. I was like 'Yeesh, Yuuta's *way* too popular,'" Itsuki remarked, almost in awe.

It seemed today's topic would start with that outing. Itsuki crossed his arms, nodding as he added, "Man, that was somethin' else."

Yuuta had no real flaws: good looks, a great build, a pleasant voice, and on top of that, he was smart, gentle, and sincere. Amane thought it was natural that Yuuta attracted the ladies' attention.

Yet, the man himself did not look too happy about it. “Honestly, being popular doesn’t make me happy at all.”

“If another guy heard you say that, he’d shake you by the shoulders until you cried blood.”

It was a problem only the fortunate could complain about. If boys still stuck in lonely singledom overheard it, not only would Yuuta get left out, he’d be hated. He only dared to share such complaints here, in a private room away from prying eyes and ears. The effect those words could have was nothing to joke about.

“Like, when guys say they want to be popular, what they actually mean is that they want girls to go crazy for them, and maybe—if they’re lucky—get physical with them, right? I just don’t feel that way at all, so it’s kinda…” Yuuta trailed off.

“Yeah, that’s kind of weird in its own right,” Amane muttered.

“You’re the *last* person I want to hear that from,” Yuuta shot back.

“I agree,” Itsuki said.

“Hey, don’t gang up on me.” Amane glared at them both for suddenly turning on him, but it wasn’t very effective.

“Come on, Fujimiya—don’t you have the same mindset as me? You don’t want to be popular with lots of girls, you just want to date the one you actually like.”

“…Yeah, that’s all I need.”

“Right, like I’m not trying to attract a crowd over here. Honestly, popularity isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. It’s not just girls that you attract—you get dragged in all sorts of messy drama too. Quite frankly, it’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

Yuuta’s distant look made it clear he’d gone through struggles Amane couldn’t even imagine. There was nothing Amane could say to that. He could only offer him a sympathetic look as he silently acknowledged how much he must have endured.

“I don’t even get it. Is getting hit on all the time really something to be happy about?”

“Which do you want? The general consensus, or my personal opinion?” Itsuki asked.

“The former. You two already have girlfriends, so of course you’d just say it doesn’t matter to you.”

“So the general consensus is that—well, it differs from person to person, but for most guys, yeah, it is flattering. Guys who want to be popular would definitely take it as a win. At the very least, it means they’ve caught a girl’s eye, which gives them a sense of pride and confidence. And if it actually leads to them going out, it’s like hitting the jackpot.”

“Yeah, I’m not good with that kind of casual mindset…” Yuuta muttered.

“Yeah, can’t say I’ve ever seen you enjoy it,” Itsuki said with a shrug.

“Of course, I’m grateful when someone shows interest in me. But, I just kind of, like…well, get put off when someone comes on too strong. Like, I’m already enjoying myself here, so don’t barge in. That feeling just overrides everything else. Guess that means I’m just not comfortable handling those kinds of impositions.”

“You really are kind,” Amane remarked. “See how you said ‘not comfortable’ instead of ‘hate it’?”

No one would blame Yuuta if he outright disliked pushy women, given everything he had dealt with up to now. But the way he softened it to just being *“not comfortable”* with them was a testament to his easygoing and kindhearted nature.

“I can’t really imagine Yuuta despising someone,” Itsuki added.

Amane had to agree. “Yeah, me neither.”

“I can’t imagine you doing that either, actually.”

“Me?”

So I’m his next target, huh? Wary, Amane narrowed his eyes, but for some reason, Itsuki looked at him that same exact way.

“Do you even have a type of person you don’t like, Amane?” Itsuki then asked.

“In what sense?”

“In relationships with people, boys or girls. You know how you hardly ever say you hate someone? I was wondering if there’s anyone you don’t like, or even despise. I do doubt it though, because you don’t seem all that concerned with other people.”

“What kind of person do you think I am…?”

Itsuki made him sound like some sort of robot. Amane wasn't exactly hyperemotional, but he did have his preferences and was perfectly capable of joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure like anyone else. He just didn't always let them show.

"Ahh, but I get what he means," Yuuta said. "You like to stick to your boundaries, and you don't stick your nose in something if it doesn't interest you or has nothing to do with you. You mind your own business."

"I mean, unless someone comes sticking their nose into *my* business, why would I bother getting riled up?"

"That's a good point, but it's also why I'm curious. Are there people that doesn't apply to? People you dislike that much?"

People Amane despised.

"…Nuisances?" he muttered.

"But I don't think anyone likes them. Is there anyone that does?" Yuuta wondered.

"*Plenty* of people out there like a good troublemaker, you know," Itsuki jumped in.

"I think it's really only the ones who know how to apologize. I don't think anyone likes the troublemakers who cause a huge scene, feel no guilt, and take no responsibility for what they've done—unless they somehow did more good than harm, or are fictional."

Chitose could be something of a troublemaker, but it was usually in small, harmless ways. And whenever she messed things up, she made sure to apologize properly and ran around trying to fix things. Her clumsy sincerity was endearing, and with her natural charm, it was hard to stay mad at her. At worst, she earned herself a light flick to the forehead before all was forgiven.

What you do after causing trouble is what makes all the difference, Amane thought as he pictured Chitose in his head.

"You mean you've never once thought, 'Man, I *hate* this guy' about someone?" Itsuki asked, disbelief in his voice. Amane rolled the word hate around in his head.

The truth was, he rarely felt any strong disgust or rejection toward others. If he had to name someone, though, then it would be Toujou. He was

the very reason Amane had ended up moving here in the first place.

But no…it wasn't like I despised him or anything.

Back then, he had felt frustrated, hurt, and devastated. A crushing despair that felt like being swallowed by a pitch-black fog had clung to him and bound his body tight with fear. He had asked himself *"Why?"* over and over again. Even so, the feeling Amane felt toward Toujou was not hatred, nor disgust.

"…One guy does come to mind, but it was less that I hated him and more that he did something I couldn't stand. I did feel devastated, but nothing more than that. I never despised him as well."

Things might have been easier had Amane hated or despised Toujou with all his heart. But all he had felt back then was—harsh as it sounded—humiliated, and above all, utterly devastated.

He'd been betrayed by a trusted friend… Used… Mocked… The frustration, the sorrow, the pain of it all cut deep. And yet, it never made Amane hate him. Possibly, deep down, he had deemed Toujou unworthy of his emotion.

"Hm. And what do you think of him now?" Itsuki inquired.

"Couldn't care less."

"Wow, that was blunt."

"Oh, uh, maybe putting it that way sounds bad. He just has nothing to do with me anymore. We won't ever see each other again, so it doesn't matter to me whether he's happy or miserable. My stance is just…go live your own life. As long as he doesn't cause more trouble for others, he can do whatever he wants."

As far as Amane was concerned, he'd already cut ties with Toujou. He planned to study and work here, so unless he returned to his hometown, he would never run into Toujou again. The only way they'd meet again was if Toujou still hadn't moved on or had some business that brought him to Tokyo, and Amane knew Toujou didn't care enough about him for that.

Toujou no longer had a place in his life. Whatever became of him, Amane could truly not care less. If they ever did meet again, maybe he would feel something in the moment—but it would end there.

I don't feel anything when I think of him anymore. He's nothing more than

a stranger to me now.

And Amane wasn't playing tough. He truly believed that.

Running into Toujou when he'd visited his parents over the summer was a big reason for that. Being able to face and talk to him directly had allowed Amane to put the past to rest. If not for that moment, he might have never truly recovered from the pain.

"And just to add, I'm also grateful to him. He was the trigger that made me move here, and thanks to that, I've found my happiness. That doesn't mean I've forgiven him and I still have plenty of thoughts about what he did, but I no longer feel awful about it. I just really…couldn't care less about him."

"…Wait, did I just poke at something I wasn't supposed to?" Itsuki asked.

"Itsuki, you're the worst…" Yuuta remarked.

"What? Why?!"

Amane chuckled, tickled by their deliberate choice to joke instead of turning things heavy. He waved a hand as if brushing away their worries.

"No, you're fine. I genuinely don't feel a thing about it anymore. I'm satisfied with how things turned out, and I'm glad I came here."

"'Cause you met the love of your life?"

"Exactly."

In the end, it was thanks to that whole incident with Toujou that he had met Mahiru and formed a bond with her. Maybe he ought to throw a dedicated Thanksgiving festival in Toujou's honor. Amane would never tell him that if they met again because he'd blow a fuse, but deep down, he couldn't help but feel grateful. Despite that, however, Amane still owed him nothing.

"…The way you immediately confirmed that shows how shamelessly straightforward you've become," Itsuki commented.

"I think he's always straightforward," Yuuta replied, "except for when you tease him."

"I guess so, but he'll just keep gushing about Shiina-san if I don't."

"…That might actually be true," Yuuta admitted.

"It's not even *remotely* true. Who do you think I am?" Amane shot back.

But no matter how much he protested, Itsuki and Yuuta just averted

their eyes in exaggerated fashion. With a heavy sigh, Amane gave up and took a sip of melon soda to wet his throat.

"Sooo, you really don't have a type of person you hate?"

"Not really. Though it might just be that there's no one around me whom I might hate. I'm surrounded by great people."

"Aw, shucks, a compliment for me? You make me blush!"

"Get lost."

"Wow, mean."

Itsuki squirmed like he'd never squirmed before, pressing his cheeks with both his hands as he acted embarrassed.

Amane stared at him blankly, then thought back to his question.

Generally, Amane could not be bothered to care about people he wasn't close to. Still, there were people who just seeing them made him dislike them.

He thought it over. Aside from just criminals, that was probably the only kind of person Amane could honestly say he disliked.

"Well, there's no one like this around me, but there is actually one type of person I just can't stand."

"Oh-ho? What?"

"People who make it their life's mission to wreck others' relationships and steal them away."

"Ahh, right…"

He'd told Mahiru something similar before. Amane hated people who deliberately chased after someone already in a relationship with the intent to steal them away.

"I can't stand them on a common sense or basic moral level. I don't even want them anywhere near me. And if someone like that ever did approach bearing their fangs, I know I would do everything in my power to make them never appear in front of me again."

Amane was aware that he had a tendency to be uncompromising, almost intolerant, about such behavior. But even so, that didn't change the raw disgust he felt toward people who lived like that.

Back in Amane's hometown, an affair caused by one such person had once torn a married couple apart. He'd only been in grade school at the

time, but even then, he had thought, *Yikes…* and recoiled in disgust when the ugly fallout had reached his ears.

In the end, the unfaithful husband left town. The mistress who had lured him away quickly lost interest and discarded him, leaving nothing but a broken home and shattered lives behind.

Of course, compensation and child support had been demanded, but even then, raising a young child alone had placed a heavy burden on the mother. Amane clearly remembered how his own mother, Shihoko, and the other neighbors had stepped in to help however they could. As for that child, who was now an elementary schooler, Shihoko often said they seemed cheerful and thriving, even without a father in the picture.

Maybe it was because he had witnessed a horrible incident up close, or because he'd grown up watching his parents' loving marriage and assumed that was the norm, or because his adolescent sense of purity ran strong. Whatever the reason, Amane had grown to feel a deep disgust toward people who acted with such dishonesty.

"Yeah, surely you'd want to chase them off before they did any damage…though I don't think Shiina-san would be lured."

"She absolutely wouldn't, so I'm not worried about that happening. But I still don't want either of us to have to experience something so unpleasant, so if I can remove the cause, I will. I don't want to waste time or energy pointlessly. After all, I'm certain Mahiru won't ever look at anyone else."

That wasn't just something Amane believed; it was something he knew for certain.

Despite that, if some embodiment of such utter insincerity were to come close, it would still be stressful and annoying beyond belief. Better to kick them out of his sight before any of that ever happened.

"Woow, bro's braggin'."

"It can't be bragging if it's the truth. And I put in the work to keep it that way."

"Only you could say that without it being a lie or sounding arrogant," Yuuta pointed out.

Amane never took Mahiru's love for granted, nor did he let it make him lazy or conceited. It was a fact, but one he treated with care. He never

neglected to put in the effort to ensure she wanted to keep loving him by showing his gratitude and treating her with the thoughtfulness she deserved, both in words and in action. He cherished her, and the effort it took to make their time together comfortable never felt like effort at all.

That was one thing he could declare without shame. And as Amane spoke on with confidence, Itsuki and Yuuta traded a look, then shrugged.

"What about yourself? You're polite to everyone," Amane returned Yuuta's comment. "From what I've seen, I can't imagine you actually hating anyone?"

"Me? Of course I've got types of people I don't like."

"Wait, you do? Surprising, not gonna lie." Even Itsuki, who had been close to him since middle school, couldn't hide his shock. His eyes went wide in disbelief.

"What do you guys take me for…? I'm human too, you know. Of course I've got likes and dislikes."

"Yeah, but I've never actually seen you show them. So it's gotta be someone I don't know, right?"

"…Uhh…no, not exactly."

"Hm? What's got you hesitating?"

"…I can't say you don't know them, Itsuki. If I had to say, then yes, there is someone I disliked—or maybe I should say used to dislike. But, uh, it's not really something I want to talk about."

"Don't tell me…it's *me!?*"

"Yeah, right. If it were you, I wouldn't be hanging out and talking with you all the time."

"Ooh, I can feel your love, Yuuta. Gosh, I'm all red again!"

For just a moment, Yuuta frowned out of irritation, but it soon softened to an awkward smile as he stirred his coffee with a spoon. The way he acted made it clear he was holding back from saying more, but it didn't seem as though he was afraid to do so. If anything, it looked like he was being considerate of Itsuki.

"But no, that's not it. It's, you know…that middle school senpai."

"…Ahh. Yeah I get you."

Amane had no idea who *"that middle school senpai"* referred to, but

Itsuki understood immediately, and his face instantly twisted into a grimace.

"You and Shirakawa-san are both my precious friends. So of course what happened then doesn't sit right with me. And as a track runner myself, what she did was inexcusable. No way I could forgive her. She crossed the line, both as a person and an athlete. It would do her good to start over and learn what it means to have basic decency."

"Yeah…you're right about that," Itsuki agreed heavily.

"Uh, am I even supposed to be hearing this? Itsuki mentioned it to me in passing before, but even so…"

Amane knew the gist of it, but the character of that senpai and what the people directly involved had felt were things only they could truly understand. As someone on the sidelines, he wasn't sure if it was right for him to be listening in on such personal grievances.

Should I step out? He glanced at them, but both Itsuki and Yuuta shook their heads.

"No point hiding it now. But yeah, looking back, I guess it was a pretty big scandal."

"And this senpai doesn't go to our school?"

"No, no. I made sure of that when I enrolled. I also found out she had a hard time staying here, so she left for another prefecture. And to be honest, even if she had tried to apply here, she wouldn't have made it past the interview. This school has standards, and considering what she did, and that it happened in her third year, there's just no way."

"That's how bad it was…?"

Amane had heard about the drama back when Itsuki and Chitose had started dating, but Itsuki had never given him the nitty-gritty details. He could still tell that it must have been a serious situation, though. From the way Itsuki talked, it was serious enough to affect exams—that alone told Amane just how bad it must have been.

"Uhh…how should I put it."

"…To put it bluntly—violence?"

"Yeah. Bad enough that, with one mistake, it could've been life-threatening."

“That’s insane. You’re telling me it was that serious?” Amane blurted out reflexively. He hadn’t thought it was anywhere near that bad. Itsuki’s face, however, didn’t change.

“Neither Chi nor I were left with any lasting injuries, so it’s nothing worth worrying about.”

“Of course I’m gonna worry! Didn’t you tell me it wasn’t anything serious?!”

“It wasn’t. I just got a small bone fracture. Chi was unscathed.”

“That’s a serious injury, you absolute fool!”

The more Amane heard, the more obvious it became that the incident had been far more dangerous than Itsuki had initially let on. And yet, Itsuki brushed it off so casually that Amane couldn’t help but feel indignant. At the very least, he thought, Itsuki had every right to be angry about something that had brought physical and emotional harm to both him and Chitose.

“That’s crazy. Just because you’re jealous, you think it’s okay to hurt someone? Unbelievable. Even if no one had gotten injured, the fact that she resorted to violence in the first place makes it unacceptable.”

Not even Toujou had been low enough for physical harm. Amane had known that even he had lines he wouldn’t cross.

But this senpai had stepped right over that line without batting an eye—and not just against one person, but against both Itsuki and Chitose. No wonder it had blown up into such a scandal. Itsuki acted unfazed, but did he really not feel angry about it at all?

“You sure there’s no lasting damage from the injury?”

“Yeah, none. Look at me—I’m in tip-top shape. Fit as a fiddle. You’ve seen me running around in P.E., haven’t you? Also, that was already three years ago.”

“…Three years ago or not, this is the first I’m hearing about you getting hurt like that. Of course I’m going to worry.”

Itsuki’s easy grin and carefree tone kept Amane from pressing further, but just hearing what had happened was enough to make him anxious. And because Itsuki and Chitose had both been involved, he was even more concerned.

The way Itsuki acted so nonchalantly and deliberately tried to hide his

injury irritated Amane a little. It felt childish of him to sulk over being left in the dark, though, so he kept that thought to himself.

Even so, Itsuki seemed to catch on, because he burst into hearty laughter that rang through the room.

"That right there is what's great about you, Amane," he said.

"Right?" Yuuta agreed.

"Don't try changing the topic," Amane stated, shooting them both a death glare. He saw through their attempt to move the conversation along, but could tell that, in typical fashion, neither seemed willing to discuss it further.

Amane wouldn't have minded if they had just said they didn't want to talk about it, but it was the super obvious evasions that made him suspicious. Itsuki, though…either failed to realize that, or worse, he knew exactly what he was doing and did it anyway.

"Aaanyway, while I can't stand that senpai, that incident was a turning point for Chi and me to change, kind of like what you went through, Amane. Not that it didn't hurt like hell, and I definitely owed my old man a favor after that."

"…So you don't hold a grudge?"

"I do, actually, if only for the fact that Chi quit track because of her. That's the one thing I'll never forgive. But she already got what was coming to her, and I'd rather chalk the rest up to a mistake of youth. No point in whining about it forever. Besides, it's not like I'll ever see her again."

When Itsuki finished with a wink and a teasing "Same as you," Amane couldn't argue any further. He pressed his lips together, mumbling under his breath for a moment, before finally letting out a long sigh.

"I'm just saying, it's fine if you want to keep some things to yourself, but if something's really troubling you or gets too heavy, tell us sooner rather than later. Don't forget what happened over New Year's."

"Believe me, I've taken that to heart. Thank you again for the help back then."

"Wait, what happened?" Yuuta asked.

"You didn't even tell Kadowaki…?" Amane muttered.

"Well, it's not like I had the chance." Itsuki turned to Yuuta. "It was just a

fight with my dad."

"That's nothing new, but judging by the way Fujimiya's putting it, it seems more than that. Let me guess—either you bottled your frustrations up until you blew up, or you kept it secret even from Shirakawa-san until she finally blew up at you, right?"

"Okay, scary… How did you nail that perfectly…?"

It seemed Yuuta knew Itsuki inside and out, and his words were right on the mark. And judging by the way he sighed with a resigned, "Sounds like your old man hasn't changed a bit," he seemed to know Itsuki's father, Daiki, just as well.

"So it's just you left now, Itsuki. Got a type of person you can't stand?"

Apparently deciding not to dig into family matters any further, Yuuta smoothly shifted the subject. But with this timing, the answer was obvious.

"My old man."

Just as expected. No surprises there.

"That's not even a type, that's a dude."

"Don't turn it into a punchline!"

"Poor Daiki-san."

"No, poor *me!* Not a single one of you is on my side! And hey, didn't Yuuta say a person too!?"

"Nope. I specifically said it was a person I disliked, not a type."

Their drinks rattled as Itsuki slapped his palm against the table, their contents sloshing inside. Amane and Yuuta jokingly told him off, saying, "Don't be so rough," "Cut it out already" as they quickly pulled their own drinks out of harm's way.

"My old man and I are like oil and water. I might've told you so before, but I'm seriously jealous of your parents, Amane. Mind if we swap?"

"Not happening. Though, yeah…I get what you mean. My parents are pretty hands-off."

Both Mahiru and Itsuki often said the same thing. For people stuck with parents who were either completely indifferent or smotheringly overbearing, Shihoko and Shuuto's perfect distance must have looked like a dream come true to them.

The way Amane saw it, his parents let him live as he wanted, but still

worried about him and occasionally launched “pay attention to us” attacks. They understood that they all had their own life, and they respected that. It was probably because of that balance that Itsuki kept half-jokingly asking to trade.

“Rather than hands-off, I’d call them amazing parents who actually respect the choices of their kid. Watching them, I honestly think, ‘Wow, I wish I had that.’ Make them adopt me when?”

“Don’t say that even as a joke, you idiot.”

“I mean, I know it’s never gonna happen. ’Cause that spot obviously belongs to Shiina-san already.”

“Seriously…”

I don’t think Itsuki’s idea of “adoption” is quite right… Amane thought. But if he pointed it out now, it would only give Itsuki another excuse to tease him, so he swallowed the retort.

“Even just from the little I’ve talked with them, I could tell your parents are calm, kind people who really love you, Fujimiya,” Yuuta mentioned. “Of course Itsuki’s jealous.”

“…Why does that make me feel ridiculously embarrassed?”

“But you aren’t denying it, are you?”

“Well, no. I do love my parents, and I respect them both as family and as people, so hearing them praised makes me happy as their son. It’s just that hearing it be said to my face like this just makes me feel awkward.”

He didn’t often say it out loud, but Amane respected his parents a whole lot, both as their child and as his own person.

Ever since he was little, Amane remembered being showered with affection. Even though both of his parents had been busy with work, they gave him as much time, money, and love as possible. When he did something wrong, they scolded him with reason; when he did something right, they praised and affirmed him warmly. They had never treated him like their puppet, but as his own person. Someone to be cherished and respected.

That kind of parent-child relationship might look ordinary, but it was anything but. Seeing the family circumstances of people he had met over the years had driven that truth home. He had been blessed with his

environment.

As their child, Amane felt in his soul that his parents had loved him, and he understood just how lucky that made him. Knowing that, there was no way he could ever turn his back on them.

"Your straightforwardness must be thanks to both your parents' upbringing and your own nature."

"Think I could get a scrap of it bottled up and sent my way?"

"I told you before, that's not happening."

"Tch. Anyway, it's not like I expect my old man's personality to change anytime soon. But still…I just wish he'd ease up a little. He jumps down my throat before even taking in what I say. I know he blames it on my usual behavior, but even so…"

Since the New Year's incident, Itsuki had started to treat Daiki a little better, but he was still very much frustrated. He released a heavy sigh. Even so, he didn't seem to seethe with hatred. It seemed he had worked through his own struggles and managed to settle things by keeping some distance between himself and his father.

"It's far easier to change yourself than to try and change someone else."

"Words of wisdom right there. That's *exactly* why I'm trying my best to change."

"I can see that for myself."

"Yeah? Then watch closely, 'cause I'll show you what I can do."

"Yeah, fine, fine, I will be."

Amane didn't need to be told. He could already see that Itsuki was trying to change, and he thought the effort was admirable. Deep down, he only hoped his friend wouldn't push himself too hard. Itsuki was, at his core, far more earnest than Amane himself. So he let the matter slide with an off-handed response.

Yuuta watched them both and smiled.

"You guys sure are close."

"Fo-ho-ho! And don't forget, my boy, you're part of this circle too."

"The heck is that supposed to be?"

"It suits you so bad, it's funny."

"You guys are awful! I take it back! We aren't close at all!"

“Ugh, so mean…I’m so hurt. *Sniff sniff*.”

“Itsuki, you’re the worst…”

“I’m the biggest victim here! And we literally did this bit earlier! Are we doing an encore now?!”

Was that his way of keeping the mood cheerful, or just his true self? Whichever one it was, Itsuki played up his outrage, taking full advantage of the karaoke booth’s privacy. Amane ignored his antics, keeping a straight face as he leaned toward Yuuta, scrolling through the song catalog together to decide what to sing next.

How Amane Spends His Days Off

“What do you usually do on your days off, Fujimiya? Flirt with Shiina-san?”

Amane blinked in surprise when his classmate Watanbe suddenly asked him the question during break.

They weren’t particularly close—just on normal speaking terms—so the abrupt topic left Amane at a loss for how to respond. Mahiru was chatting with Chitose and Ayaka a little ways off, and Itsuki was fiddling with his phone at his desk, which left no one around Amane to notice his confusion.

Watanabe wasn’t trying to bully or make fun of Amane. He was simply curious and figured he might as well ask since he had none of his usual friends to talk to. He looked at Amane with an utterly carefree attitude.

“Look, we may be dating, but that doesn’t mean we’re together all the time, and even when we are, it’s not like we’re all over each other.”

“Ehh, really?”

“Why do you sound disappointed…?” Amane didn’t even bother to hide his exasperation before then asking, “What exactly did you expect?”

“You two seem so crazy for each other, I figured things must get pretty wild when you’re home alone,” Watanabe answered with a grin.

Amane sighed loud enough to make his disbelief perfectly clear.

Of course, Amane was aware that he and Mahiru were close—and yes, they did cuddle at home from time to time—but it wasn’t as if they were dependent on each other. In fact, right now Mahiru wasn’t by his side at all. She was happily chatting away with her friends. Even at home, there were plenty of moments when they shared the same space yet did completely different things, and neither of them felt lonely because of it. That was why it felt a little awkward for people to assume they were constantly glued

together.

More than that, what really made Amane self-conscious was the unspoken assumption that they always spent their days off at his place. Granted, they did, but having someone else guess that so easily left him feeling strangely embarrassed.

"Just to be clear, it's not like she's at my place all the time, all right? Don't get the wrong idea."

"Funny you say that, considering how often you two talk about dinner and stuff."

"That's…a separate matter."

He couldn't exactly argue back on that point, so Amane struggled for a comeback. Watanabe, entirely unfazed, let out a carefree laugh. "So you really *are* together all the time, huh?"

Amane's lips twitched involuntarily. He knew Watanabe didn't mean anything by it, so Amane could only purse his lips into a tight line, silently enduring the teasing as his classmate gave him a puzzled look.

"So anyway, what do you do on a completely free day, then?"

"What's a completely free day?"

"You've got that part-time job, right? So on a day when you don't have work or other plans, what do you usually do? Apart from flirt, I mean. Do you just study or something?"

"A full day off with no work, huh…"

Watanabe had a point. Amane usually worked three or four days a week, so his schedule was pretty packed most of the time. Still, it was his choice to get a job, and he didn't have any complaints about it.

When Watanabe asked what he did on his rare days off, Amane recalled the completely plan-free day he'd had not long ago.

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A day with no school, no work, and no other business to take care of had become something of a luxury for him lately. Though he always tried to keep at least one weekend day open to spend time with Mahiru, there were

times when he had no choice but to take an extra shift. Even when he wasn't working, there were dentist appointments, trips to the barber, or invitations from friends, so it wasn't often that he had an entire day all to himself.

Today, however, was one of those rare, blissfully empty days, and Amane had decided to take it easy for once. Out of habit, he woke up a little before six, then went back to sleep. And when he finally checked his phone again, it was already seven. Seeing no one around to witness him, Amane let out a long, monstrous yawn before sitting up in bed.

"So sleepy…"

It was still early enough that he could have gone back to sleep, but Amane knew that if he let himself be ensnared by the bed's magical warmth now, it would only lead to another three, maybe even four rounds of dozing off again. He was better off getting up now while he was awake and had enough sense to do so.

Shaking off the faint urge to crawl back under the covers, Amane climbed out of bed, stripped the used sheets, along with the duvet and pillow covers, and tucked them under his arm.

Perfect. It's sunny today, and there's no rain in the forecast.

Sunlight peeked through the gap in the curtains. It was still winter, so the sun hadn't fully risen yet, its rays soft and faint, but in another hour or two it would shine bright enough to mark the start of the day.

Amane still did his laundry even on cloudy days, but in winter it never dried properly without some sun. Since there were only so many daylight hours suitable for drying clothes, today was the perfect laundry day.

Man, that blissful feeling of a second nap after waking up is always so short-lived, Amane thought. He carried the bundle of bedding under one arm and his phone in the other as he passed through the living room toward the bathroom.

Inside the laundry basket, there were still some clothes left over from the day before. He tossed them all into the washing machine together, set it to the usual cycle, and started the load.

After confirming in his head that there wasn't any other laundry to run, Amane silently gave thanks for the modern marvel that was automatic

detergent dispensing. Riding that small wave of productivity, he brushed his teeth quickly to shake off the last of his drowsiness.

He figured he'd skip washing his face for now. Since he planned to go jogging soon, he could just do it when he showered afterward.

Washing too often only kills the good bacteria anyway, he reasoned with lazy logic as he returned to the living room to fill the electric kettle with water and press the boil button.

He could've just grabbed some cold water from the fridge, but drinking something that chilly first thing in the morning, then heading out for a run right after seemed like a great way to freeze himself from the inside out. So warm water it was.

I'll check my phone while it boils, he thought—only to realize a second later that he'd left it in the bathroom. Letting out a small groan, he hurried back to retrieve it.

Seems I got a few messages while I was asleep.

His lock screen was cluttered with a whole list of unread message notifications. Only the content of the most recent one was shown, which was a text from Itsuki that read, *"Dude, look! I'm way too much of a genius! Praise me!"* and it had an image attached.

Amane couldn't help letting out a short snort through his nose. Whenever Itsuki sent messages like that, it was almost always about something ridiculous. The attached image alone was enough for him to tell it was going to be something silly.

He's definitely done something stupid again, Amane thought, making a rather uncharitable prediction. Still, he decided that if the message didn't at least make him laugh, he'd repay Itsuki later with a suitably sharp reply.

Then, the kettle chirped impatiently, so he went back to the kitchen. He poured himself a mug of hot water and carried it into the living room, placed it down on the low table, and set the air conditioning to heating mode.

As the air conditioner began to blow a gentle wave of warm air, Amane unlocked his phone once more. The messaging app icon was dotted with several unread notifications.

Did anyone say they needed to contact me about something?

Amane opened the app to check if Itsuki was just spewing more nonsense. Aside from him, there were also unread messages from Mahiru, Chitose, Ayaka, and even his work group chat that appeared at the top of the screen.

He decided to ignore Itsuki for now and check the work chat first, since that one seemed the most time-sensitive. Inside, there was a message from their manager, Fumika, that said *"The aircon in the break room has broken down, and the repairmen won't come for another two days. Until then, everyone, please take care not to catch a cold."*

A series of *"Understood"* messages followed from his coworkers, and Amane quickly added his own "Understood" before checking Mahiru's message next.

Amane and Mahiru hardly talked over messaging apps, so when they did, their texts were strictly practical. Some people found it odd for a couple, but since they saw each other almost every day and spent most of their time together, there was little need to do so.

As expected, Mahiru's message contained a polite morning greeting, her plans for the day, and an approximate time she'd be home. She also mentioned she'd let him know the exact time once things were wrapping up.

"Right, Mahiru said she was going out with those two today," he murmured to himself.

She'd told him yesterday, *"Tomorrow I'm going out with Chitose-san and Kido-san, so I won't be home until late afternoon."* Reflecting on it now, Amane felt a bit impressed.

Kido's gotten super close to Mahiru, he thought.

He'd always figured their personalities would mesh well, but he hadn't expected them to grow so close that they would hang out together on their days off. Mahiru was, at her core, a little shy around new people, so to know that she had opened up to such an extent surprised him.

And speaking of Ayaka, her own message popped up in his mind. It was a cheerful text accompanied by an adorable sticker: *"I'm borrowing your girlfriend tomorrow!"* Clearly, she'd gone out of her way to be considerate by letting him know beforehand.

She's not a possession, and it's not like I'm going to stop her from hanging out with her friends.

He wasn't going to meddle in Mahiru's friendships or her business, nor did he ever intend to restrict her. As long as she wasn't in any danger, he had no reason to stop her from doing what she wanted.

Ayaka's message was meant half as a greeting and half as playful teasing. After pondering how to respond for about ten seconds, he finally sent back a safe, neutral reply: *"Thanks for the heads-up. Have fun."*

With that out of the way, he opened Itsuki's message. If his friend was asking to be praised, then surely it must've been something truly impressive. Taking a sip of his now-lukewarm water, Amane glanced at the attached image. What greeted him was a tower of coins stacked perfectly upright on a desk. In the background were eraser shavings and a mechanical pencil, which suggested that Itsuki had probably lost focus while studying and decided to fool around during a break.

It took a lot of skill, and Amane had to admit it was kind of impressive, but the thought of actually praising him as requested irritated him. So, he sarcastically replied, *"wow. so cool."*

He's really good with his hands, though this time, it's a skill wasted.

Itsuki had built that thing after losing focus while studying, but honestly, that concentration would've been better spent on some actual work. Not that Amane planned to tell him that.

Just as amused as he was dumbfounded, Amane's lips curved slightly, though not quite into a full smile. As he took another slow sip of warm water, he casually reached for the stack of reference books piled neatly in the corner of the low table and began reworking the problems he'd gotten wrong yesterday.

He only had a sliver of time before heading out for his jog, but even so, Amane made a habit of squeezing in bits of study whenever he could, as even learning a little here and there could make a massive difference over time. That didn't mean he chained himself to his books every single break, though. Doing nothing but study would've felt suffocating, so he studied when he could and relaxed when needed.

Thanks to Mahiru's careful explanations yesterday, he could now easily

solve the problems he'd only just been struggling with. Silently, Amane offered a little prayer of gratitude to his precious lover, who wasn't there with him right now.

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Once he'd finished his warm water and felt fully awake, Amane changed into his running gear and stepped outside.

"Cold!"

The apartment hallway was chilly enough, but the moment he got to the first floor and passed through the entrance doors, a sharp sting of cold air bit at his skin, forcing the word out of him.

Winter mornings made outside exercise a tough activity. Even with a windbreaker on, the cold pierced his cheeks, and no amount of familiarity could make it pleasant.

Standing still only made it worse, so he decided to get moving to warm up. After a quick round of stretches to loosen up, Amane started off his run at an easy pace.

A glance at the watch strapped to his wrist told him it was 7:40 AM.

His jog route usually took him just under an hour, so he'd likely be back at the apartment around 8:30 AM. He wasn't trying to get faster, but to instead stay in shape and keep the muscles he'd worked so hard to build from fading away, so he maintained a steady and unhurried pace.

As he ran along the familiar streets, the scenery was the same as always, yet somehow different given the calm stillness of a weekend morning. The quiet neighborhood made jogging on his days off surprisingly enjoyable.

Only the rhythm of his breathing, the sound of his shoes striking against concrete and gravel, and the faint hum of distant city noise reached his ears. He took in those sounds he usually paid no notice to as he drew deep breaths.

I actually kind of like running, Amane thought to himself.

People often pegged him as the indoor type, but he didn't actually dislike exercise at all. In fact, he found something soothing about moving

his body toward a goal he'd set for himself.

He figured that if Yuuta, who was still active in the track club, or Chitose, who never stopped running even after quitting, ever heard him say that, they'd immediately try to recruit him on the spot. The thought made him chuckle faintly as he kept his feet moving at a steady rhythm.

As he continued, his mind gradually cleared of all stray thoughts. He focused solely on kicking the ground and getting blood pumping fast through his body.

Taking the occasional sip from the sports drink he'd brought from home, Amane ran at his own pace, and before long, he found himself right back in front of his apartment building exactly when he expected to. By now, he had the route memorized. He knew exactly what pace and distance would bring him back home at the perfect time.

Even though it was just a jog, his breathing was still a little heavy, so he slowed to a walk to catch his breath, making sure to loosen up his muscles as he did.

Yuuta had drilled it into him that skipping post-run stretches was a terrible idea. It could stiffen his muscles or hamper circulation, potentially undoing all the benefits of the workout. Never forgetting that advice, Amane dutifully took his time, carefully moving through each stretch.

I remember when I couldn't even run for an hour… Now I can do it, no problem.

A full marathon would still be way out of his league, of course, but compared to before, his stamina and muscle strength had improved a lot. The way he felt his breathing adjust much quicker and his body recover much more rapidly was proof enough of that progress.

Once back home, he followed his usual post-run routine: rehydrate first, then wash. The washing machine he'd started earlier had already finished, so before heading to the shower, he carried the laundry out to the balcony to hang it up. With that done, Amane made his way to the bathroom to take a quick shower and rinse off the sweat.

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Since he only needed to rinse off sweat and feel fresh again, he took a shower much shorter than his usual evening bath. Even counting the few minutes he spent moisturizing afterward, he was out of the bathroom much quicker than at night.

The fact that he was hungry played a part in that, too. He'd hurried through everything, and when he checked the time, it was already close to nine.

Any later and breakfast would've turned into brunch, so Amane set the washing machine to run another cycle to wash the clothes he'd worn for his run, then headed to the kitchen to start preparing his morning meal.

There'd been a time when Amane didn't even know the first thing about cooking, but these days, he could at least handle making breakfast on his own. Granted, his morning meals were the kind of simple dishes people online liked to call "lazy meals."

He never felt like putting too much effort into breakfast, especially when he was already hungry, so today's menu was straightforward: two sunny-side-up eggs fried next to some sausages, a salted rice ball made from leftover rice he'd defrosted, and a quick miso soup prepared using one of the frozen miso portions he and Mahiru had saved in advance.

To finish it off, he scooped some of Mahiru's pre-made side dishes into small bowls. All in all, it was a simple yet fairly balanced breakfast seasoned with nothing more than salt, pepper, and Mahiru's magic touch, which meant there was no chance of it not being good.

"Thanks for the meal."

Amane brought his hands together and closed his eyes to give customary thanks to the food—and to Mahiru—before digging into his late breakfast.

The flavors were exactly what he'd expected, and exactly what he'd wanted.

The sunny-side-up eggs seasoned only with salt and pepper needed nothing else. They carried a rich and satisfying flavor without any extra additives. The sausages, steamed and pan-seared to perfection, burst with scalding-hot juices the moment he bit into them. Hot enough to threaten his

tongue, yet so irresistibly savory that he couldn't help but take another bite. The light char along the edges added both color and aroma, making the food all the more tempting—so much so that Amane's mouth watered even before he took another bite.

The miso soup, made in a flash by adding one of his pre-prepared miso portions to hot water, still carried depth thanks to the stock and added ingredients. The intense flavor was especially comforting after exercise.

With that post-run hunger triggering his appetite, everything tasted better than usual. But as he found himself eating too quickly, Amane summoned Mahiru's voice in his head. *"Eating too fast isn't good for you. You'll feel fuller and digest better if you chew properly,"* she would have said. Imagining her gentle scolding, he made himself slow down, taking the time to savor each bite.

Taking small bites of the kinpira in the little side dish, Amane made sure to chew thoroughly as he mulled over what to do next.

Today was a full day off. Mahiru would be out for the first half of it, and he had no particular plans. He'd set the day aside to take care of all the little things he'd been putting off.

Needless to say, the idea of lounging around and doing nothing all day sounded tempting, but experience had taught him a painful truth: the more he let chores pile up, the more of a headache they'd become later. As much as his lazy side protested, it was better to get everything done now and be free to relax afterward.

Let's see… Once the laundry I've just put in finishes washing, I'll hang it up, then clean the living room and my room, make lunch, and then get some studying in after that…

Here he was, already thinking about lunch in the middle of breakfast.

Guess I really am a bit of a glutton, he then thought.

But since Mahiru wouldn't be home for lunch today, he'd have to handle everything on his own. Cooking wasn't the issue; it was deciding what to make. He needed to consider what ingredients were left in the fridge, what was about to go out of date, and what needed to be saved for future meals before planning out a menu.

But the most pressing question of all was: how many eggs could he

safely use?

There were six left after I cooked breakfast, he thought. *If I use two for lunch, I'm still good.*

Mahiru's voice echoed in his mind, *"Is it really fine to eat four eggs in a single day?"* but Amane pretended not to hear it. Instead, he focused on the golden-orange yolk of the half-cooked eggs made to his liking.

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After finishing breakfast, Amane brushed his teeth and then washed the dishes.

Under Mahiru's firm principle of *"Never let dirty dishes pile up, no matter how much of a hassle it is,"* he washed the plates, pans, and utensils he'd used, and wiped down the sink until it gleamed. Then, with the momentum still going, he began his cleaning routine.

That said, because he made a habit of wiping surfaces or sweeping during spare five or ten-minute intervals throughout the week, the apartment never got particularly dirty. Today's cleaning was more about maintenance than deep scrubbing.

He wiped dust and smudges from the shelves and desk, used a wet sheet to pick up stray hairs and fine dust, then ran the vacuum over the floor.

Since he kept his desk and floor mostly clear of clutter, that simple process was enough to leave the place spotless. Mahiru always said, *"Cut corners now, and you'll just make more work for yourself later,"* and it was easy to see what she meant.

Yeah… This is easy as pie, Amane thought as he wiped away a few splatters of oil that must've jumped from the pan while making his eggs. The stovetop, free of any stubborn grime, wiped clean with almost no effort. Moments like this made him appreciate just how right Mahiru had been.

He already knew that regular cleaning made things easier later, but actually experiencing it made him realize how true Mahiru's teachings really were. If you put in a little effort every day, you'd never have to pay

back the compound interest of neglect all at once.

Feeling once again grateful for Mahiru's thorough guidance, Amane glanced at the expiry chart pinned to the fridge and decided that lunch would be omurice.

With that plan in mind, he went to the rice cooker. If he was making omurice, he'd need freshly cooked rice. The display read a little past 10 AM, still early, so he set the timer to have the rice ready around noon, adding a bit of extra water before closing the lid.

God bless pre-washed rice, he thought, appreciating how easy it made things. While he was at it, he prepped a batch of kombu broth for dinner and stored it in the fridge. Then, guessing his second cycle of laundry should be just about done, Amane headed toward the washroom to check the washing machine.

The washing machine had already finished its cycle and had turned itself off. Amane pulled the laundry out and carried it to the balcony, shaking each piece lightly to smooth out the wrinkles before hanging it up beside the first batch to let it air dry.

Hanging two loads of laundry out on the balcony took up a lot of space, but since he didn't plan to wash another load today, all that was left was to wait for them to dry.

Technically, he'd finished everything he needed to do, which meant he could finally relax for a while. However…

"I guess I should get some studying in after all," he muttered.

His job took up a good chunk of his schedule. He wasn't neglecting his studies because of it, but ever since he'd started working, he definitely spent less time at his desk than before.

When he'd first decided to take the job, he'd promised himself that his grades wouldn't slip because of it. So whenever he had free time, he always tried to fit in study sessions, and a day like this, with a solid block of uninterrupted time, was perfect for that.

Sure, part of him wanted nothing more than to kick back and laze around, but he reminded himself that he wanted to be someone Mahiru could be proud of. Using that as motivation, he reached for the reference book and notebook he'd left on the low table.

Once I'm a third-year, I'll have to study even more, so this is no time to slack off. If I start getting lazy, I won't have any right to lecture Chitose for doing the same thing, Amane thought with a wry smile.

He and Mahiru were technically the ones tutoring Chitose, but if the teachers themselves slacked on their own studies, they'd lose all credibility. If he was going to guide someone, he needed to have the skill and discipline to back it up.

In that sense, Chitose's presence actually helped him. Wanting to stay capable enough to teach her gave him more motivation, and explaining things out loud helped consolidate his own understanding. For her, it meant getting clear answers to what she didn't understand. For him, it was a good mental workout. All in all, it was a win-win situation.

Well, ideally, Chitose will reach the point where she can understand things on her own.

In the end, it was best if she could grasp concepts without needing someone to explain them to her, but that level of progress didn't happen overnight. What mattered was that she continued to learn little by little, and that steady growth was what he truly hoped to see from her.

"Well, not like I'm smart enough to act all high and mighty about it."

He was on the smarter side compared to most of his classmates, but with someone as exceptionally brilliant as Mahiru right beside him, there was no room for arrogance. When it came to academics, he was always chasing after her, doing his best just to keep up.

To stand even a little closer to her, all he could do was keep putting in the effort.

That's why I must make good use of this time. Amane flipped open his slightly worn reference book. "Let's do this," he said quietly to himself, and with that small spark of resolve, he picked up his mechanical pencil and got to work.

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Before he knew it, it was almost noon.

Amane checked the time on his phone and decided it was about time to start making lunch, so he closed his reference book and notebook.

His body, ever honest, recognized the timing instantly, and his stomach let out a low, pitiful growl that sounded somewhere between a groan and a whine, giving him a chuckle. Determined to silence that noisy stomach of his, Amane stood up, tied on his apron, and headed for the kitchen.

He hadn't noticed while studying, but the rice cooker had long since finished steaming. When he lifted the lid, the freshly cooked rice gleamed invitingly.

He'd already decided on omurice for lunch today. Instead of the usual chicken rice, though, he planned to make buttery rice, using up the vegetable-packed caponata that had been sitting in the fridge as the sauce.

I just know this'll be good, Amane thought. It wasn't because of his own cooking skills, but because Mahiru's caponata was delicious no matter what you paired it with. Just imagining it made his mouth water, and he swallowed before getting to work.

The process wasn't complicated: finely chop some onion and a bit of garlic, sauté them with rice seasoned in butter, salt, and pepper, then wrap it all in a soft omelet and top it with the warmed caponata.

There was a time when that might've been too much for him, but now Amane could handle cooking at an average level without trouble. Before long, his omurice was done to perfection.

Not bad, if I do say so myself.

So he thought, but he knew full well the credit mostly went to Mahiru, for both teaching him how to cook and making the caponata in the first place.

The omelet sat before him, releasing a soft wisp of steam. The egg had no visible burns or tears. It had a smooth, vibrant yellow surface with that springy texture characteristic of the classic, old-fashioned style of the dish. For an elite omelet enjoyer like himself, this was the pinnacle of perfection.

The caponata poured over it was, per Mahiru's wishes, packed generously with chunky vegetables. Given color by her gentle care and her desire for them to eat plenty of greens, the omurice gave off an irresistibly appetizing aroma and appearance.

If he snapped a photo and sent it to Mahiru, she'd probably reply with a *"Well done!"* sticker, but right now, his priority was satisfying his hunger. He reached for his spoon, only to pause halfway. He'd realized there was still one important thing he hadn't done yet.

"Thanks for the meal."

Amane brought his hands together and closed his eyes for a brief moment to offer silent thanks for the food before him.

It was a small ritual of gratitude and good manners, but one he never skipped. With that done, he finally gave in to his impatience, picked up his spoon once more, and scooped up a generous bite of the steaming omurice.

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The first bite confirmed that it had turned out pretty well. The real star was Mahiru's caponata, as its rich flavor practically carried the entire dish. His only real contribution was cooking the eggs just right, but even so, the meal was delicious, and that was more than enough to satisfy him.

After finishing, Amane quickly cleaned up before the rice and sauce could harden on the dishes, then decided to treat himself to a cup of coffee.

When he finally picked up the phone he'd ignored during lunch, the screen showed that it was a little past one in the afternoon.

Mahiru had mentioned she'd be taking the train that arrived at three, and her earlier message confirmed as much, which meant Amane had some time to kill until just before then.

As the rich aroma of freshly ground coffee beans from his workplace filled the room, he calculated how long it would take him to change clothes and get to the station, and decided he had about an hour and a half of free time. That was hardly long enough for anything big, but too much to simply waste.

In moments like these, Amane's go-to choice was always to study.

Good thing I actually like studying.

If he didn't, he probably wouldn't even bother. And if he forced himself to learn, he'd just end up making no progress.

I'll soon be a third year, so there's no such thing as too much preparation.

Setting an alarm on his phone to remind him when it was time to leave, Amane picked up where he'd left off and dove back into his studies.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

The sharp chime of his phone alarm pulled Amane out of his focused state. He downed the last of his now-room-temperature coffee, quickly got changed, and headed out to meet Mahiru.

She'd messaged him earlier, saying, *"You really don't have to come pick me up,"* but the thought of seeing a blissfully satisfied Mahiru returning from her outing was too tempting to resist. Besides, she always looked genuinely happy whenever he came to meet her—so much so that the idea of not going never even crossed his mind.

After getting ready in a hurry and making his way to the station, Amane arrived just as the train Mahiru was supposed to be on pulled in.

Since it would've been a hassle to go through the ticket gate, he waited outside instead. Amid the crowd of people with the same intent, he caught sight of a glimmer of flaxen hair shining brilliantly in the light.

Of course, it wasn't as though Mahiru was literally glowing. That was just an illusion of his own mind. The more you liked someone, the sharper your ability became to pick them out of a crowd. That glow he saw was part of that phenomenon, and also because Mahiru was a polished, adorably pretty girl, she was impossible to miss even among a sea of faces.

"Mahiru, over here!"

When Amane called out to her as she moved along with the crowd, her face instantly lit up.

"Amane-kun, thank you so much for coming all this way."

"No problem at all. I was planning to stop by and grab groceries anyway."

Mahiru jogged up to him, her expression still a little apologetic, but the joy shining on her face far outweighed it. That modesty, that gentle bashfulness of hers, stirred something tender in him, and he bit down

lightly on his lip to keep a stupid grin from creeping onto his face.

Thanks to her outing with Chitose and Ayaka—what Chitose had dubbed a "refresh day"—Mahiru looked radiant, and her complexion glowed as she smiled happily at his words.

"Did you bring the shopping list?"

"Yep, got it right here… Ah, crap. I shoved it into my pocket in a hurry, so it's all crumpled now."

"Goodness me. You really need to take better care of things."

Despite her scolding, Amane was fairly sure Mahiru already had most of what they needed memorized. Then again, so did he.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll make it up to you by carrying the bags."

"…You always whisk them off me without needing an excuse anyway."

"Well, now I've got a good reason to."

"Honestly."

That little *"Honestly"* of Mahiru's wasn't so much irritation as it was her usual *"You always do this, Amane-kun,"* which was a phrase she used often. Amane never quite understood what she meant by it, but according to Mahiru, *"It's not a bad thing. It's actually a compliment. Yes…a compliment…"*

"I've got a hand warmer in my pocket, so use it to warm your hands. You must be freezing," After taking the bags from Mahiru, who hadn't worn gloves since it was a hassle when carrying things, Amane gave his coat pocket a light pat.

For some reason, Mahiru slowly shook her head. "…I'd rather have your hands than the hand warmer."

"Then why not both? Be greedy and take the deluxe set."

"Then don't mind if I do."

The way she acts so spoiled sometimes is just too cute, Amane mused, offering her his hand. Mahiru didn't hesitate to take it. Her palm felt cold against his, and the sleeve of her soft coat brushed against his arm.

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She pressed her body up close, linking her arm with his, and Amane blinked once in surprise before lowering his gaze to her. Mahiru looked up at him, her expression shy, as if to gauge his reaction.

"What did they 'teach' you this time?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Why do you always assume they told me something?!”

Mahiru puffed up in protest, pressing against him to physically show her discontent. Thankfully, the thick fabric of her winter coat was there to spare him. If it were summer, he was sure her contact would be a far more complicating.

He could feel the curious glances from passersby and felt a flicker of embarrassment rise within him. Still, he softened his expression, offering Mahiru a gentle look meant to soothe her visible displeasure.

“I just thought you didn’t really like linking arms in front of this many people.”

“…It’s cold. I just want to stay close.”

“I see. In that case, do it to your heart’s content.”

This was her own way of seeking affection. A gentle little display of her feelings.

Feeling both amused and touched by how much more openly she’d begun expressing her feelings compared to before, Amane tightened his grip, threading his cold fingers firmly through hers to convey to her his overflowing feelings of love. Without letting go, he guided her hand into the pocket of his coat.

Inside, the hand warmer had turned the space into a cozy haven of heat. Welcomed by that warmth, Mahiru’s face softened, her brows relaxing into a blissful little expression that made Amane’s chest grow warm in turn.

“Not cold?”

“Thanks to you, Amane-kun, I’m all warm and toasty.”

“…Even your hands and your face?”

“…You’re not meant to point that out.”

“Oh, my bad.”

They continued to chatter, joke, and laugh on the way home.

“By the way, I finished off the caponata you’d made for lunch. That okay?”

“No problem at all. I was planning to use it up soon anyway. Now then, what should we make next…”

“I’m craving your meat sauce. The one packed with tomatoes and all that coarsely ground meat from the food processor. I love how chunky

yours always turns out."

"I do that because larger pieces make it more satisfying to eat. But no, not today—we're having fish for dinner. You can have your meat sauce tomorrow."

"What kind of fish are you thinking?"

"I figured we could see what looks good at the supermarket, but judging by the advertisements, yellowtail seems like the best choice. Maybe I'll simmer it in with the daikon."

"That's gonna go great with rice… Oh, we need more eggs as well."

He recalled that he'd used quite a few that morning and at lunch, leaving only four in the carton. Considering tomorrow's meals, it was about time to restock. Eggs were essential to Amane's daily life, so he never let himself run out.

Was there anything else we needed? As Amane mentally ran through the contents of the fridge, he felt a faint squeeze from the hand he was holding. It was a way of Mahiru telling him, "*Look at me*."

When Amane turned toward her, she was gazing up at him with a smile so beautiful it could warm the coldest night.

"How many eggs did you eat between breakfast and lunch?"

"Heh heh."

"Amane-kun?"

"…Four's still good, right?"

"Okay, no eggs in the yellowtail daikon for you tonight."

"C'mon, don't be mean."

That, he couldn't accept. Amane gave her hand a few pleading squeezes to bargain his way out of it. Mahiru, however, only looked back at him in disbelief.

"Amane-kun, your only flaw is that if I don't keep an eye on you, you end up overeating. No matter how nutritious eggs are, having too many isn't good for you."

"I know you're right, but even so…"

"I mean, one day won't hurt, but you love eggs so much that I'm afraid you'll go overboard."

"Just one! Just let me have one!"

“Honestly… You’re hopeless.”

“Yess!”

Since leaving eggs out of Mahiru’s already-delicious cooking would’ve been a tragic loss, Amane decided to push his luck and was rewarded with a sigh and a fond, *“I suppose I have no choice”* look.

It’s not like I eat five every day, Amane thought, pumping his free hand into a quiet fist of triumph.

From beside him came Mahiru’s soft, delighted laughter.

“I can never tell if you’re a kid or an adult, Amane-kun.”

“I prefer to think of it as keeping my inner child alive.”

“And by that, you mean throwing a tantrum over eggs?”

“Hey, that’s not fair. You never told me you were adding eggs to dinner today.”

“Oh? Would anything have changed if I had?”

“I would’ve skipped one of the fried eggs at breakfast.”

“So the option of not eating eggs at all doesn’t exist for you…”

“It does not.”

“Goodness me…”

Mahiru sighed not out of irritation but out of fondness. She didn’t scold him any further after that, and if anything, she seemed amused. Mahiru leaned in closer against his arm, her body brushing his as she let out a soft, contented hum.

These little everyday bouts of playful teasing were one of the joys they shared.

When their eyes met, a bashful smile with a teasing glint shone on Mahiru’s face. That childlike side of the real her felt ever so endearing to Amane, and without hiding the smile tugging at his own lips, he gently brushed his thumb along her palm, tickling her fingers in return.

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After stopping by the supermarket and finishing their shopping, they returned home. Once they got changed, put everything away, and checked

the time, the short hand on the clock had just passed four.

It was still a little early to start making dinner, so Amane simply set the timer on the rice cooker and left it at that. They had about an hour of free time ahead of them, though it wasn't as if Amane and Mahiru planned to spend it doing the same thing.

Even when they spent time together, they weren't so clingy that they had to be doing the same thing all the time. That afternoon, Mahiru got to work reading reference books while Amane pushed the low table aside to make space for his workout.

He'd been planning to do it in his own room so as not to disturb her studying, but Mahiru had shot that idea down with an oddly passionate refusal. According to her, it was easier to stay motivated when they were in the same space, or something along those lines.

Yeeaah, this has Kido written all over it.

Even if it came from the girl he loved most, Amane didn't take every word she said at face value. No, Mahiru obviously just wanted to watch him work out. He wasn't going to take his shirt off or anything, but she still seemed adamant. Either way, since she'd insisted so earnestly, there was no reason to refuse. He laid out his training mat in the living room and got started on his usual workout routine.

Rather than training to failure, Amane focused on maintaining his physique and strength, so his workout wasn't particularly intense. Despite that, Mahiru still seemed to find it entertaining, and she looked perfectly content as she giddily glanced back and forth between her reference book and him.

He wanted to ask whether she was actually managing to study like that, but knowing her, she probably actually was. Mahiru wasn't a girl who did anything halfheartedly. If he were to quiz her about something from that book, she'd likely answer without missing a beat.

Amane had worked through that same reference book a few times himself, but he didn't remember every question word for word. Either way, trying to recall them in the middle of a workout was out of the question.

"…If I sat on your back right now, would I crush you?"

Mahiru muttered the question while watching him hold a plank. Since

he'd just reached a natural stopping point, Amane let himself drop flat onto the floor, picturing her perched on his back.

Regular push-ups might be a challenge, but with his forearms on the ground for a plank, he figured he could handle it without collapsing completely. Still, his core would sag under the extra weight, which kind of defeated the purpose of the exercise. It wouldn't make for very proper training, that was for sure.

"I wouldn't collapse…but yeah, I would struggle under the extra weight."

"Extra weight…"

"I wasn't calling you heavy. I meant it'd put a lot more strain on me than a normal plank."

Mahiru repeated his words under her breath, sounding slightly miffed, so Amane quickly clarified things before she could take it the wrong way.

He'd never once thought of her as heavy, as she was very light. Still, she was toned, with just the right amount of muscle, and thanks to her healthy diet and regular exercise, she probably had strong bones too. It was the natural, healthy weight of a well-balanced body.

Amane simply wasn't yet strong enough to ignore that entirely, so yes, she would make for extra resistance. But that was a matter of physics, not an issue of her being heavy.

Amane knew better than to throw around words like *"heavy"* too carelessly since he understood perfectly well how touchy that could be for a girl's maidenly heart.

"But if you start worrying about it and try to lose any more weight…" Amane began.

"What will you do?"

"Then I'll go all out in the kitchen and make you meals packed with every nutrient I can think of."

He doubted Mahiru would ever neglect her diet, but she might still start holding back a little if the thought got stuck in her head, and that was something he couldn't let happen. She was already slender enough that he sometimes worried she might snap in half if she lost even a little more. Still, he also knew that a girl's pursuit of beauty wasn't something that a few words of concern could sway.

So Amane's best countermeasure was to feed her himself and make sure not a single bite went to waste. His cooking couldn't hold a candle to Mahiru's, but she hated wasting food, so as long as it wasn't downright awful, she'd eat every bit of it.

"That…doesn't sound so bad, actually."

"What do you mean, *not so bad*? Mahiru, you're already slim and light enough, so don't push to lose more weight. If my cooking's fine with you, I'll make sure you're properly fed."

"I wouldn't do anything extreme. Crash dieting damages your skin, your hair, and even your organs. And…I don't want to make you worry, Amane-kun."

"Yeah, I'd worry a *lot,* you know."

"Then rest easy. I'm living perfectly healthily. O-one, two…!"

"*Gwah—!*"

Perhaps wanting to prove that there was nothing for him to worry about, Mahiru slid off the sofa and—after a brief moment of hesitation—plopped down on Amane's bum. She wasn't heavy by any measure, but the sheer shock of the situation still had him groan.

He could feel her freeze up as she sat on his bottom. For the record, Amane had reacted that way half as a joke and half to tease her, so he

wasn't actually in pain. And Mahiru surely knew that too.

After remaining perfectly still for a good five seconds, she suddenly began rocking side to side atop him, as if to express her displeasure.

"I was kidding, I'm sorry. Just, please stop swaying me," Amane pleaded.

"Have you learned your lesson?"

"Yes, yes, I've learned it, I swear—so please, stay still!"

It didn't hurt, and she wasn't heavy, but having his lover sit on him and swaying back and forth proved problematic in more ways than one.

Whether she realized that or not, Mahiru paused at his plea, her movements finally coming to a halt.

"You're not telling me to get off?"

"Well, if you *want* to ride me, I'm not gonna stop you."

"But I'm interrupting your workout."

"Then let's just call this a break."

Either way, there was no chance he could focus now. He'd just finished a good set, so Amane decided to wrap things up for the day.

Resigning himself, he offered his back to her. So long as she didn't start bouncing again, she could do as she pleased.

A quiet "Honestly…" slipped out from Mahiru's mouth. Amane thought it wise not to point out how pleased she sounded.

"…Amane-kun, your butt is hard."

"It'd be worse if it were soft, wouldn't it?"

"Your back is hard too."

"Let's just say that's proof I've been working out."

"…You *have* been training hard," she murmured.

Her fingertips trailed lightly along his back, tracing the lines of his muscles as if following their contours.

When Amane had started working on his physique, he'd learned the names of muscles like the latissimus dorsi, teres major, and trapezius. Mahiru's touch brushed over those very spots—first tentatively, then with growing curiosity, as she began to explore their shape and firmness more openly.

If he let her continue, she'd probably keep examining him, driven by both fascination and affection, until she'd memorized every inch of him.

Deciding it was best to put a stop to it before that happened, Amane drew the line there.

"I don't even have to look to know you're grinning back there."

"I–I am *not*!"

Her voice cracked halfway through her denial, making it painfully obvious that he'd had her panicked. Still, determined to defend her claim, Mahiru began lightly smacking his back in protest.

"You sure?" he pressed.

"…Super duper sure."

"You're making it so I can't check, aren't you?"

"I don't know, am I?"

With her hands pressing down around his shoulder blades, Amane couldn't twist around without throwing her off balance. All he could manage was to push up slightly with his arms, like a half-hearted plank, but any more than that, and Mahiru would topple over. He had no choice but to stay still. She knew that perfectly well, of course.

Then, before he could process it, he realized it was no longer her hand that was pressing him down. What had been the light weight on top of his hip area was now sprawled across his entire back, shoulder to legs. Two incredibly soft appendages pressed down on him.

Mahiru slipped her arms around his chest and hugged him tightly from above, drawing herself close. Amane bit down hard on his lip, still facing forward.

"I don't mind that, but uh, they're pressing against me."

"I know they are."

"At least pretend you don't!"

"It's not…a big deal. I–I'm your girlfriend, after all, so…it's a little late to be embarrassed about that. Besides…whenever you hug me tight, you always seem to love it…don't you?"

"Hey, that sounds terrible out of context! Sure, when it happens, I might…think about things sometimes, but I do my best not to focus on it, okay?!"

Amane was, after all, a perfectly normal teenage boy. When he felt his girlfriend's soft body against him, he naturally had his thoughts and

reaction. There were times he wanted to simply enjoy the feeling, and if he were being honest, moments when he wished he could reach out and touch her himself, if allowed. Even so, Amane always tried to suppress those impulses before they surfaced because he never wanted Mahiru to feel uncomfortable.

Something told him Mahiru wouldn't exactly say no to him if he ever crossed that line, but that wasn't to say she'd feel good about it, either. If she wasn't in the mood herself, and he ended up being the only one swept away by desire, that kind of misunderstanding would do neither of them any good.

Amane didn't want to force anything on her, nor did he want to let his urges dictate her actions. He believed those moments should only happen at the right time, when both of them genuinely wanted it.

"Um…thank you, I suppose?"

"No, I do it for my own sake. Anyway, it's just…hard to focus when you press *them* up against me like that."

He avoided saying anything too specific because if he did, Mahiru would probably turn bright red and combust on the spot. Still, the moment the words left his mouth, he felt her press herself against him just a little more.

"Mahiru."

"…I want to appreciate everything you have, Amane-kun."

"You know, you can be kind of a perv sometimes."

"Y-you know that's not what I meant!"

"Ow, ow!"

Thump, thump. Her surprisingly strong head thumped against his back again and again, leaving him no room to defend himself.

Amane had only teased her because he knew she hadn't meant it that way, but Mahiru clearly didn't appreciate being made fun of. Her second wave of attacks came sharper this time, her chin pressing into his back in an adorably petty counterstrike.

It was his own fault, so he took it without complaint.

After a few more of those harmless little blows, Mahiru finally stopped. Then, with a soft exhale, she tightened her hold around his chest.

"I just want to learn how far your hard work has taken you."

“I get that. But for now, could you get off me?”

“…Okay.”

Mahiru replied in a quiet, dejected voice, and it seemed she’d taken his words the wrong way. Once she reluctantly climbed off, Amane sat up and turned to face her. Meeting her eyes squarely, he tilted his head slightly to one side and asked:

“Don’t you wanna appreciate me from the front?”

Amane had figured Mahiru preferred watching him face-to-face when she wanted to “appreciate” him, so he was a little surprised she’d been content with just his back. Spreading his arms, he flashed her a teasing grin.

“Now’s your chance—this offer comes with a complimentary hug.”

Her cheeks instantly flushed, and her eyes sparkled with color as she looked up at him.

“…Th-then…from the front, please.”

“As you wish.”

Lately, Mahiru’s gotten way more honest about what she wants.

Amane wrapped Mahiru up gently as she dove into his arms, and he breathed in her milky-sweet scent with a loving smile.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

After the two of them enjoyed a thoroughly and perfectly wholesome little moment together, they both set about preparing dinner.

Their dinner was already halfway done; the stock had been made in advance, and the rice was ready to go. Amane’s job now was just to make the miso soup and a few side dishes, while the main course was Mahiru’s domain. In truth, there wasn’t all that much for him to do.

He’d gained enough knowledge and practice that as long as he had a recipe, he could handle things without needing instructions. His cooking skills had come a long way, and with smooth coordination between them, it didn’t take long before dinner was laid out neatly on the table.

Tonight’s dinner was a simple Japanese menu consisting of white rice, miso soup with tofu and enoki mushrooms, spinach in a light broth, and

yellowtail daikon, complete with the promised boiled egg and a few sides that Mahiru had prepped in advance, like marinated lotus root and simmered beans.

Amane couldn't help but notice the table had ended up looking a little too brown overall, but that was a small price to pay. They'd both agreed it was about time to finish off the last of the prepared dishes in the fridge, and this was the menu they had made to do just that.

"Mmm, so good."

After pressing his hands together to give his thanks to the food, Amane took a bite of Mahiru's yellowtail daikon. The gentle, savory-sweet flavor had soaked all the way through the daikon, mingling perfectly with the rich taste of the yellowtail fish. Each mouthful made him crave another spoonful of rice. The fish had been marinated beforehand, so there was no fishy smell, which created a delectable harmony between the two ingredients. It was so good that he wanted seconds even before finishing his first serving.

"Thank you very much. Your miso soup is delicious too, Amane-kun. You've really improved at making the broth."

"Well, I do have a genius teacher."

Mahiru sipped her soup quietly, and though she praised him, Amane insisted the credit belonged to her.

He didn't always have the time to prepare stock from scratch, but since it was his day off, he'd gone the extra mile to soak the kombu for a good while and blending it with bonito flakes to make a proper awase dashi. The result was worth the effort. Soup made from carefully drawn stock had a mellow, refined depth of flavor that instant granules could never replicate, and it made even a simple meal feel indulgent.

Feeling rather pleased with himself for managing to extract such a clean, rich broth this time, Amane couldn't help but beam when Mahiru offered him her unreserved praise.

"Hehe, I'm proud to have such an excellent student."

"I humbly ask for your continued guidance and support."

"Why are you suddenly being so formal? Honestly… Anyway, the spinach in the same broth turned out delicious too."

"Thanks. The broth's good, and spinach is in season right now."

The spinach, having endured many colds of winter, had developed a natural sweetness that paired beautifully with the dashi, making for a wonderfully simple yet flavorful dish. Of course, since Mahiru had handled nearly all the seasoning aside from the broth, Amane figured about eighty percent of the credit still went to her.

"Oh yeah, leafy greens have gotten cheaper lately, which is cool, but the supermarket near us still charges a bit too much for the amount you get."

There were several grocery stores within walking distance, but Amane and Mahiru mostly shopped at the one along their route home from school.

They stocked nearly all the ingredients, seasonings, and basic items Amane and Mahiru used on a daily basis, so unless they needed something specific, they rarely shopped elsewhere. The only real downside was how the quantity, freshness, and price balance of their produce section left something to be desired.

It wasn't that the quality was bad, but when compared to the price and freshness to other stores nearby, it ended up costing just a little more than it really should have. Even the onion bags, for instance, were the same size, same price, same type of onions, yet one bag would have a single onion less. Little things like that always made it feel just a bit wasteful.

"The farmers who grow the produce work so hard, and so do the delivery drivers and the store clerks who stock the shelves. It doesn't feel right to simply demand lower prices. Besides, every store focuses on different strengths. The supermarket a bit farther away has better vegetables, but our one is better for fish, so it's hard to choose," Mahiru explained.

"Yeah, guess that's just how the cookie crumbles. Running around between stores is a hassle anyway. And they do say time is money."

"Exactly."

"…Still, you never compromise on rice, do you?"

"The staple food is non-negotiable. Absolutely not." There was a subtle intensity in Mahiru's smile as she declared as such. "I can compromise on price, but never on quality. Great rice makes a world of difference."

"Yeah, I get that. If the rice doesn't taste right, the whole meal feels off."

Amane wasn't a picky eater and rarely left food unfinished. But although

he wasn't particular about taste, his palate was sharper than he gave himself credit for.

Cheap rice wasn't necessarily bad, but the thought of eating thin, flavorless grains day after day was out of the question. For that reason, he fully supported Mahiru's stance.

Neglecting good food wasn't just bad for the body—it took a toll on the mind, too. It affected their mood, their energy, even their quality of life. And that was one thing Amane refused to compromise on.

"Personally, I'm not a fan of cheap rice or milk. The taste just isn't the same. The fortified kinds have their own appeal, but they aren't quite what I crave when I want milk."

"I can get behind that, though I'm more of a 'as long as it's drinkable, it's fine by me' kind of guy… Though, uh, sorry for chugging so much of it all the time."

"It's fine. Milk is best finished quickly once opened. And besides, I still drink my share too… You do drink quite a bit, though, Amane-kun. Maybe that's why you ended up so tall?"

"I reckon it's got more to do with genetics. But thinking back, my parents always made sure we ate balanced meals, and since my family loves the outdoors, I was constantly moving around. Guess that gave me a good environment to grow."

Even now, Amane wasn't exactly sure why he'd shot up so fast, but he'd long since decided it came down to having a healthy, well-rounded lifestyle back then.

"I've been carefully managing my nutrition and made an effort to exercise, but…do you think I could still grow taller?" Mahiru asked.

"Maybe you could get an X-ray and find out?"

"I'm not about to waste medical resources on something like that… Wait, are you implying my growth plates are already closed?"

"I would never…"

"Look at me when you say that."

"You're already plenty cute and absolutely lovely just the way you are. I'm not saying you shouldn't wish to grow taller, but I don't think you need to."

Amane smiled as he said that, to which Mahiru gave him a faintly sulky look back.

"I have this feeling that you're telling me I won't ever grow taller," she said, sounding slightly miffed. However, since she seemed pleased with being called *"cute,"* her temper vanished and she quietly returned to her meal.

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"Thank you for the meal."

"Thank you for the meal. And all right, Mahiru, I'm gonna have to stop you right there. Don't go stealing my job."

They always made it a rule to finish their meals together, joining hands and voices to offer thanks to each other and the food before rising from their seats. When Mahiru began to stand, Amane stopped her in her tracks.

In moments like these, Mahiru would usually try to wash the dishes, but they had agreed long ago that tidying up was primarily to be Amane's responsibility. Though if he'd come home exhausted from work, that would be another story, and there had been times he'd gratefully accepted her kindness on such days. But today, Amane had the day off and had spent it entirely at home, so fatigue was no excuse.

Mahiru already took care of the grocery shopping and cooking whenever he worked. If he let her expend even more effort now, he wouldn't be able to look himself in the mirror.

"Mpf. But it will get done faster together."

"It would, but because I can't help out much on days I have work, I'd like you to let me handle it today. You usually end up doing most of the work anyway, so it'd make me happier if you let me spoil you a little this time. All right?"

Amane spoke gently, trying to coax her with a soft tone.

Even so, Mahiru still didn't seem convinced. She looked up incredulously at Amane, who had already stood from his seat.

Her complaint came from the fact that she was a considerate girl by

nature and enjoyed doing things together with Amane.

While that made Amane happy, he wouldn't let that become a reason for Mahiru to do extra work.

But he knew that at this rate Mahiru would start pouting, so he flashed her a casual smile.

"Ah, then how about you make us some milk tea later? I like the way you make it."

Mahiru's eyes shot open at his very modest request, then narrowed once more, like she wasn't expecting that compromise.

"…Goodness me."

Relieved that her reply was one of acceptance, Amane began placing the dishes onto the tray.

"You've been saying 'goodness me' an awful lot today."

"And whose fault do you think that is?"

"Mine. And that's why you should just relax, okay?"

"Dummy."

"Tell me something I don't know."

When Amane laughed as if to say *"You're only realizing that now?"* Mahiru gave him another miffed look, though now for a completely different reason than before. He only shrugged his shoulders and headed to the kitchen, intent on finishing up the cleanup quickly.

He had already washed most of the dishes and utensils as he cooked, so the sink was practically empty. There was no real need for Mahiru to help this time. It didn't take long to wash the few plates, cutlery, and the pots and pans he'd transferred the leftovers from into containers.

True to her word, Mahiru hadn't come to help. But the moment Amane finished washing up and putting everything away, she slipped into the kitchen to take his place, and he couldn't help but to suppress a laugh that threatened to escape his throat.

"Your favorite royal milk tea is done, Amane-kun."

"Only you would go through all that extra trouble, Mahiru."

He *had* asked her to make some milk tea, but the fact that she'd chosen royal milk tea, which took more effort and meant extra cleanup, made it clear she wanted to give him an extra treat for his work. There might have

been a subtle message in the way the milk pan and strainer were already rinsed before she even served the drink…but Amane decided it was safer to pretend he hadn't noticed.

"It's fine."

"Thank you, Mahiru."

"You're very welcome."

Amane liked both coffee and tea, but Mahiru's royal milk tea was in a league of its own. Grateful that she'd gone out of her way to make it, he settled in to enjoy a quiet moment after their meal.

Mahiru's royal milk tea was brewed with tea leaves chosen specifically to go with the generous amount of milk it was simmered with. The drink was so delicious that even Chitose had sung its praises. Rich and creamy but never heavy, it struck a perfect balance where the flavor of the tea and the depth of the milk blended in harmony. It was so good enough it could even earn a place on a café menu.

"Got anything to take care of after this?" Amane asked.

They'd just had dinner, and Amane wasn't nearly disciplined enough to go for a jog at night, so he was simply relaxing for the moment.

Mahiru, on the other hand, tilted her head slightly. "Let me think…" she murmured, though she didn't seem particularly conflicted as her gaze drifted toward the low table.

On it sat two steaming cups of royal milk tea and Amane's stack of study materials and reference books that were pushed to one side.

Mahiru had a fair number of her own study guides back at home, but they'd prepared a shared set of books they could both use at Amane's place. She'd recently bought a new one and decided to leave it here, which Amane had gratefully made use of. And right now, her eyes were following that very book.

"I think I'll study after my stomach settles a bit. I was out for half the day today, so I didn't get to do my usual revising."

"Admirable as always."

"…Says the guy who spends his days off studying and training."

"Well, I have a job, so if I don't keep up then, it's gonna drag my grades down later. I promised myself I wouldn't let them slip, after all."

Amane knew that it was risky timing to take on a job in the fall of his second year, right before their senior year. He knew better than anyone that it could impact his grades, which was why he made a conscious effort to study whenever he had a free moment. He didn't want to disappoint either Mahiru or himself.

Even so, he wasn't cramming every second of his life with schoolwork, and since he often studied with Mahiru, it never really felt like a chore.

"Still, the fact that you're working hard doesn't change," Mahiru said softly. "If anything, I think you're more admirable than I am, Amane-kun. I've already gone ahead and learned most of the material, so I'm not actually taking in anything new."

"Mahiru," Amane said with a faint smile, "do you think it's unfair when people prepare the best they can before tackling something?"

"…Of course not."

"I don't consider the effort you put in to be unfair. Knowledge fades if you don't keep reinforcing it, so if you've managed to retain it this whole time, that's proof you're still making an effort now. That's something to be proud of."

One of Mahiru's bad habits was that she tended to value other people's efforts more than her own. She never dismissed her own achievements, but she did often play them down.

Amane had once been the same way—humble to the point of self-deprecation, and unable to acknowledge his efforts the right way. But now, he'd learned how to see effort for what it truly was.

"Even so, if you still think I'm admirable, then let's just say we both are. I'm proud of myself—and of you too, Mahiru."

When Amane said that and looked to her for agreement, Mahiru pressed her lips together for a moment. Then, she suddenly wrapped her arms around his arm and buried her face against it.

Mahiru could hardly contain herself, but what feeling was she struggling to hold back? Her expression told Amane that above all else, it was joy.

"I love you," she said.

"I know."

"You already knew?"

“I already knew.”

“…Good.”

“Should I say it back anyway?”

“N-no, not today.”

“Why not today?”

“You already said it lots earlier! And the other day too! You say it all the time!”

He had told her he loved her before they’d even started cooking dinner through countless words, gestures, and small touches. And Amane was relieved to know that those feelings had properly reached her.

Mahiru, however, seemed to be near her limit. Her face flushed bright red as she kept rubbing her head against his arm.

Amane preferred to openly show his feelings than to ever let Mahiru doubt his love for her, so he always tried to honestly tell her how he felt. But if he overdid it, Mahiru would get so embarrassed that she would shy away from him for a while. Finding that perfect balance was never easy.

“Maybe I haven’t told you enough?”

“I’m completely full!”

“I see, can’t be helped then.”

If he pushed her too much, she’d only run away, so when Mahiru clearly reached her limit, the rule was to back off without hesitation. Nevertheless, the moment he did step back so easily, she’d always look just a little disappointed, which was something Amane found excruciatingly endearing, though it was definitely not something he could ever say out loud to her.

“O-okay, that’s enough,” Mahiru stammered. “It’s study time now.”

“Okeee.”

As Mahiru turned her body away, obviously to try and hide her embarrassment, Amane chuckled quietly enough that she wouldn’t hear, then obediently gave his reply.

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Once they got into studying, time flew by before they knew it.

When Amane happened to glance at his phone, he was surprised to realize that it was already the hour Mahiru usually headed home.

"I should get going now," she said.

"Yeah, got it. Good work today."

She probably still had things to take care of at her own place, so Amane nodded, not wanting to keep her too long.

For two hours they studied in silence… Or actually not, as they occasionally quizzed each other on problems, but Mahiru had stayed remarkably focused the whole time. Even when she paused for a sip of her drink, her posture never slacked, and her concentration never wavered.

"You too, Amane-kun. You've been at your desk this whole time."

"Well, it's hard not to focus when I've got such a diligent role model sitting by me."

"Why, thank you. If we managed to motivate each other, then I'm glad."

"Yeah, anyone would feel fired up with someone next to them solving problems at lightning speed."

Mahiru's mind worked fast, and by making use of all her mastered knowledge, she moved through each question at an incredible pace. Watching her from so close, there was no way Amane wouldn't feel inspired to keep up.

"You say that, but you never stopped writing even once the entire time. Very admirable, Amane-kun."

"And you did great too, Mahiru. Very, very admirable."

It was important to praise each other, so Amane reached out and gave her head a still gentle but heavy pat. Mahiru's cheeks puffed out ever so slightly, and she glanced up at him with an adorably sulky look that wordlessly conveyed that she was upset.

"…You messed up my hair."

"You're gonna take a bath after this, aren't you?"

"Well, I am, but… Then I'll just mess up yours too, Amane-kun."

Mahiru, always one to return playful teasing in kind, immediately reached out toward his head. He could have easily stopped her if he wanted to, but if he did, she'd only end up sulking again. So Amane obediently leaned forward, letting her do as she pleased.

Her hands tousled his hair roughly as though she were petting a big dog. It was slightly messy, but Mahiru's love still came through. Whatever pout she'd worn moments ago had vanished, replaced by a bright, delighted smile as she happily played with his dark hair.

"Hm…when you sweep your bangs this way and make your hair a little puffier, you look completely different, Amane-kun."

Somehow, Mahiru's playful tousling had turned into serious hairstyling. She began adjusting his hair with a focused look, changing his usual part, brushing his bangs in new directions.

Normally, Amane left his hair as-is, only styling it neatly to frame his eyes when going out. But what Mahiru was doing now gave his hair more volume for a lighter, airier look. He couldn't see for himself, but judging from her touch, it probably gave him a more casual, easygoing impression than usual.

"I can give it a go, but let's save it for my next day off. I'll practice a bit before then."

"Practice?"

"If I'm going to fulfill your request, I should at least get to know the best way."

"…The best way to do what?"

"The best way to sweep you off your feet?"

Changing things up for a little excitement won't hurt, Amane thought. He figured it'd be nice to show her a different side of himself to make her fall for him all over again. In fact, because Mahiru always wanted to see him in new looks and styles, he was more just indulging her wish.

"My feet are constantly swept, you know…"

"Whaaat? I'll still practice anyway."

"Just don't overdo it, please."

"I'll do my best."

"You're not listening."

"Well, I can be a stubborn guy."

"Dummy. Don't be proud of that," she scolded.

Mahiru ruffled his hair again, but it was hardly enough to make him stop. The gentle touch of her hand only made his body and heart feel

ticklish.

Accepting her adorable little insult with a smile, Amane brought his face to her shoulder. Mahiru whispered a soft, affectionate “Goodness me…” before slipping her arms around his back, pulling him close as if to relish his warmth.

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“Good night, then. See you tomorrow.”

“Yes. Good night, Amane-kun. See you tomorrow.”

After enjoying a goodnight hug for a little while, Amane reluctantly let Mahiru go and began getting ready for bed.

He hadn’t bathed yet, so after brushing his teeth, he headed for what would be his second bath of the day. His morning shower was just to rinse off sweat. The evening bath, on the other hand, was to cleanse himself properly and unwind.

Mahiru was probably bathing around the same time, though unlike her, Amane didn’t take nearly as long, so he’d likely finish first.

Girls really do go through a lot of work, huh…

There was much more to washing for girls than boys. There were half-body baths, massages, scrubs, and even after getting out of the tub, there was moisturizing, skincare, and hair care to do. From what Amane had seen, it all seemed like a pretty involved routine.

He didn’t feel like going that far himself. His routine only involved a regular wash and then using a bit of moisturizer. Ever since he’d started paying more attention to grooming, he at least used some basic skincare products, though he wasn’t nearly as particular as Mahiru. If it suited his skin, that was good enough for him.

Still, compared to how he’d been in the past, it was definite progress, and he figured he deserved a little credit for that.

“I hope I’ve gotten a little cooler.”

The reflection staring back at him in the mirror was certainly brighter than the one he remembered from before. His build had filled out a bit

too—not muscular by any stretch, but toned enough for some definition to show beneath his skin. And thanks to better posture, confidence oozed from his body, something he'd never felt from himself in the past.

"…Maybe I should ask Kido what Mahiru's type actually is?"

Impressing Mahiru wasn't Amane's goal by working out, but when considering that she'd recently become a muscle enjoyer thanks to a certain someone's meddling, he couldn't help but want to tailor his training to accommodate her tastes.

She already seemed pretty fond of how he looked now, but if she had an ideal in mind, well…he wouldn't mind aiming for it.

But if she said she liked guys built like bodybuilders, I'd have to draw the line there.

A physique like that took strict dietary control and relentless training, which was completely unrealistic for a student about to enter his senior year and face exams. If that was Mahiru's ideal type, he'd have no choice but to give up on that front.

Hopefully she's satisfied with "decently fit," he thought as he stepped out of the bath, his skin still warm. Following Mahiru's advice of, *"Moisturize immediately after getting out,"* he applied lotion onto his face to lock in moisture. Thanks to her teachings, his skin stayed smooth, clear, and free of breakouts. Between that and the healthier diet she'd helped him stick to, Amane owed a lot to Mahiru.

Once he finished moisturizing, all that was left was to dry his hair, brush his teeth, and he was ready to call it a day.

Amane was never one to linger in the bath for long, so by the time he'd completed his routine and slipped under the covers, the clock read just past ten o'clock in the evening. He could study a little more before bed, but his body was already in full relaxation mode. Nights like this were best spent falling asleep while still warm from the bath, before the heat faded away.

If I want to study, I might as well wake up early and do it then, he told himself, knowing perfectly well that wasn't going to happen. Focusing instead on the comforting warmth that kindled a pleasant drowsiness from within, he let his mind drift.

Wrapped in his cozy pajamas, gentle heat filled him out to his fingertips.

He knew from experience that if he just let his mind wander and avoided stirring up any strong emotions, sleep would take him in no time.

…I've gotta get up early tomorrow to make lunch.

The reason he'd gone to bed earlier than usual was because it was his turn to prepare their bento boxes. He always felt bad leaving it all to Mahiru, so from time to time, he made lunch for the both of them instead.

He didn't make anything complicated, but Mahiru always looked so genuinely happy when he cooked for her that it made him want to pack it full of the things she liked best, just to see that smile again.

Sweet tamagoyaki, rice balls with plum and tuna, octopus-shaped sausages, and then…

A while back, he'd made Mahiru a lunch box modeled after the ones his parents used to pack for him, and she'd been absolutely delighted. She'd even told him she wanted to have it again, and that memory had stuck with him ever since.

Lately, he'd mostly relied on leftovers or frozen side dishes he could heat up and pack quickly, so their lunches hadn't really felt like proper bentos. Tomorrow, he decided, he'd go for something that truly looked and felt like one.

With that thought, he pictured the radiant smile Mahiru would make and slowly drifted off, sinking into a gentle sea of contentment.

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"Well, just my regular routine, I guess. Study a bit, relax a bit, and take it easy, you know?"

When Amane summed up how he usually spent his completely free days off, Watanabe gave him a look that all but said *"You serious?"*

"Really? I figured you'd be one of those guys who buried themselves in their books all day long."

"I mean, yeah, I do study, but not crazily. I just study normally, and it's a habit at this point. You don't actually think I'm some kind of study nerd, do you?"

"Not a total nerd, but you definitely give off the 'honor student' vibe."

"…Is that supposed to be a compliment?" Amane asked dryly. "I'm not that serious, you know. I'm not one of those guys who sacrifice all their free time just to cram all-day and every day."

It went without saying that Amane did all the studying he needed to, and he wasn't the type to find it unpleasant, but he wasn't so uptight as to devote every spare moment to it either. When he felt tired, he would take breaks, go out to have fun, read books, and chill together with Mahiru. He made sure to keep a healthy balance between work and leisure.

Why does everyone think I'm some kind of non-stop study machine…? he thought, giving Watanabe an exasperated look.

Watanabe scratched his head and muttered, "Well, I kinda had to tell myself that, or else I would feel awful about myself…" a comment that only deepened Amane's confusion.

As he tilted his head, trying to decipher the meaning, Watanabe groaned, "So you're just naturally good at managing your time, huh… Goddamn it man," before clutching his forehead and trudging away in defeat.

Watching him go, Amane felt a pang of guilt for having unintentionally bruised the guy's ego. And then, from behind, he heard a familiar voice call out, "You know, Amane…"

Turning around, he found Itsuki watching him with an expression that could only be described as complicated.

"…You didn't lie to him, but you didn't tell him the whole truth either, did you?"

"What gives you that idea? I'm actually studying less than the average student preparing for entrance exams."

From what he'd seen online, plenty of people spent most of their waking hours studying. By that standard, Amane's workload wasn't anything extraordinary. He wasn't one to compare effort, but if they were talking sheer hours, he was definitely on the lighter side.

"You told him you take it easy, but please tell me you are doing the housework."

"What, you think I'd just dump everything on Mahiru like some selfish

jerk? She definitely helped me clean back in the day, I'll admit! But now I do everything myself!"

Amane wouldn't deny that he'd relied far too heavily on Mahiru when they'd first met. He owed her more than he could ever repay, and honestly, he could bow with his forehead to the floor and it still wouldn't feel like enough of a thank you. But over time, he'd learned to take care of things on his own, bit by bit, until he could manage his entire apartment himself. He had earned Mahiru's seal of approval.

I mean, Itsuki saw me at my absolute worst. I get why he would doubt me.

It was only natural for him to wonder whether Amane could really manage on his own now. Still, Amane wanted to make it clear that he'd gotten used to living by himself. Even without Mahiru around, he could keep the place clean and in order just fine. Though as for cooking, he wasn't about to claim he could match Mahiru's level there. Not by a long shot.

"And what about how you supposedly 'relax a bit'…?"

"Like I told Watanabe, I'm not as hardcore about studying as you think. I take breaks and take turns quizzing each other with Mahiru sometimes, so it's not like I'm some study demon posing as a guy. Also, it helps that I don't hate studying."

"What about your games and manga?"

"Hmm, I still keep up with a few ongoing series, but as for games…there hasn't really been anything I've wanted to play lately. And the ones I've got piled up are kinda hard to play when Mahiru's around."

"Oh-ho? Sus."

"They're horror games."

"Tch."

"Don't click your tongue at that… What were you even expecting?"

"Well, obviously, something a little more…*ah-hn!* and *ooh-la-la!*"

"Yeah, right. There's no way I could buy a game like that even if I wanted to, and if I somehow did, Mahiru would immediately start questioning me how I got it."

"Ohh, so Shiina-san does get jealous, huh?"

"No, she'd just interrogate me on why I thought it was okay to have something I legally shouldn't own yet—and where I got it from."

"Oh…"

Mahiru might have been his girlfriend, but she never tried to police Amane's interests or hobbies. Even if he did choose to vent his stress in that way, she'd probably just give him a wry smile and say, *"That's just how gentlemen are,"* and leave it at that—assuming, of course, he was actually old enough for it in the first place.

"Mahiru wouldn't make a fuss about that kind of thing."

"Wait, are you speaking from experience?"

"Hell no! I asked her ages ago about how she'd react if I had one."

"Aw, lame. I was hoping for a juicier story."

"You know it's not my job to entertain you, right…?"

Amane gave Itsuki a questioning glare. *Why does this dude have to be so disappointed that nothing happened?* he thought.

Itsuki, of course, only grinned.

If there had been some kind of argument, Itsuki probably would've laughed his head off. Amane unfortunately trusted him well enough to know that for certain. And if Itsuki did keep pushing, well…Amane was seriously considering leaking to Chitose exactly what kind of "items" her boyfriend kept hidden in his room.

Luckily for him, that moment never came.

"What are you two talking about?"

Before Itsuki could say anything, Mahiru returned to the classroom and peeked over in their direction.

"Nothing important," Amane said casually. "Just that this guy's always thinking below the belt."

"…I'm not entirely sure what that means, but sure?" Mahiru replied politely.

"Don't just agree with him, Shiina-san!" Itsuki yelped, his voice dripping with panic. "You guys are gonna start a huge misunderstanding!"

It was oddly satisfying to watch Itsuki be so desperate, but Amane kept that a secret.

Mahiru, for her part, merely offered a calm, gentle smile, not concerned in the slightest by Itsuki's distress.

"Chitose-san has told me a few interesting things about you."

“Wait, hold your horses. What exactly did she tell you, Shiina-san?!”

“Oh, who can say?”

Even though Mahiru showed a kind smile that meant no harm, the twitch in Itsuki’s cheeks only grew worse by the second. To anyone else, it looked perfectly genuine and innocent. But to Itsuki, that same smile must have looked like a loaded weapon.

Now a little pale, Itsuki bolted out of the classroom, no doubt to find Chitose and interrogate her for what she’d said.

Amane, both amazed and shocked, stared at him in disbelief as he left.

What on earth has he done that has him in such a panic?

“…By the way, what were you actually talking about?” Amane asked Mahiru.

“Just ordinary day-to-day things. Chitose-san avoided anything too personal. Akazawa-san probably just…interpreted it in his own way. He must have something on his conscience.”

“Mahiru, you’re kind of scary sometimes.”

It had probably just been an offhand joke, but for someone with a guilty conscience, her words had landed like a direct hit.

Even Mahiru herself seemed unaware of how sharp her strike had been, and Amane felt a bead of cold sweat trace down his back.

Maybe it’s best not to smother her with so much affection she actually starts hating it… Amane then thought. He couldn’t let himself get on her bad side.

Growing Friends, and Everlasting Love

Since the New Year's break had ended, Chitose had started putting real effort into her studies.

After their talk about working hard together, she settled on that path. She was now much more proactive about asking Mahiru for help, and even when Mahiru wasn't around, she'd open her textbooks and reference books on her own.

It was a wonderful change that Chitose understood was necessary for her future. Mahiru, who wished for nothing more than for Chitose to walk the path she desired, welcomed that shift wholeheartedly.

Of course, Chitose still had her moments of laziness, but since she was genuinely pushing herself to study, Mahiru had no reason to hold back her support.

Though today was a holiday, Amane was away at work, so Mahiru had invited Chitose over to her place to review their first-year material. Knowing Chitose, Mahiru suspected that everything she'd crammed into her head for the exams had already slipped right out again, so she had made the suggestion herself. And after about two hours of guiding her through the review, Mahiru realized her suspicion had been entirely correct.

"Aw man, why did my past self have to be such a big fool…?" Chitose groaned in regret, her face buried against the living room table.

Mahiru offered a tricky smile as she closed the textbook.

"When they look back, everyone has things they regret or wish they had done differently. What matters is learning from that lesson to plan your next step."

Chitose still remembered a fair amount when it came to subjects where each module built on the last—like math formulas or English grammar. However, with history timelines, the details of past events, or English vocabulary, there were gaping holes in her memory. Every so often, a pained lament of "Uh, did we even learn this…?" slipped from her lips. Of course, they were all things she had studied long ago.

Entrance exams demanded not only everything students learned over their three years of high school, but also a great deal from middle and even elementary school. If she didn't have the basics down, she would inevitably hit a wall. Surprisingly often, it was those basics that many students failed on, so Mahiru had resolved that their approach would be to revisit what Chitose had already learned, consolidating her foundation piece by piece.

"You make it look like a breeze, Mahirun."

"It's only that I study ahead of time and make a habit of reviewing regularly. The amount of time we've invested is simply different. While you were dedicating yourself to track, I was spending my days at a desk."

"Ugh… If you've been learning and learning since way before I even started, I don't have any right to complain. All I ever did was run or laze around with Ikkun. This one's on me."

"I still wouldn't call that a bad thing. You just had different priorities, and it's thanks to that socialising that you're the person you are today."

The truth was, Mahiru herself could admit that she used to be an overly serious girl. She was so serious, it bordered on being obstinate.

She had always known, deep down, that her parents would never notice her—yet still she thrashed and clawed for their approval. No matter how hard she toiled, she couldn't even catch the corner of their vision. That was the life she had led.

All it left her with was a stockpile of knowledge and skills. She didn't think that made her admirable in the slightest. If anything, she saw it as the pitiful crystallization of her desperate efforts.

Chitose, on the other hand, had lived a far healthier student life, and Mahiru had felt a vague envy for it.

"I, on the other hand, think I was the foolish one."

"Eh? Where's this sudden self-deprecation coming from?"

“No, it’s just…when I look back, I realize that what I really needed back then was to look outward a little more. To borrow your words, Chitose-san, my past self was a big fool.”

That said, Mahiru had now grown fond of herself in ways she never used to be. She could look back on her past efforts and honestly praise herself for her hard work. So it wasn’t all regret that she felt.

“But it’s thanks to those days that you’re the person you are today—and that you ended up dating Amane, right?” Chitose borrowed Mahiru’s words and tossed them back at her.

Mahiru blinked wide-eyed and studied Chitose’s face, only to find her grinning in triumph as if to get payback.

“Yes, that’s right. It’s not as though I have no regrets, but everything I went through shaped who I am today—and it’s this version of me that Amane-kun fell in love with.”

“Mm-hmm. The present is built on the past, so moping and fretting over it too much really doesn’t do any good.”

“Indeed. Regardless, you should reflect a bit on the way you let all the exam material slip right out of your head immediately afterward.”

“You’re absolutely right! Sorry for being such a hassle!” With a vigorous, “I swear I’ll do better!” Chitose shot her hand into the air.

Mahiru gave a small laugh and sliced off a bite-sized piece of the chilled mizu-yokan she had made as a treat, then brought it to her lips.

She knew all too well that once your concentration broke, it wouldn’t come back right away, so in times like this, it was best to shift gears and take a break.

The smooth texture and refreshing sweetness of the mizu-yokan spread across her tongue, which worked wonders to restore her mind that was worn out from studying. When paired with her green tea, its sweetness, toasty fragrance, and faint bitterness harmonized perfectly with the snack to fill both her mouth and her heart with a bliss beyond words.

“Come to think of it, you two have been dating for over half a year now, right?” Chitose said as she sliced into the rabbit-shaped nerikiri on her small dish with a black wooden pick.

Mahiru recalled the moment in question. “Since the sports festival, so

just under ten months now."

It was currently early March, not long after their year-end exams. It would soon be ten months since they had started dating.

Mahiru felt torn—on one hand, *Has it really been that long already?* and on the other, *It's only been that long?* Those opposing sentiments threatened to clash in her chest, but before she could sort through them, Chitose stared at her with a look that said, *"You've got to be kidding me."*

"…It's only been that long?" she muttered.

"Why are you looking at me all shocked? You were there when it all started, Chitose-san."

"I mean, like, it hasn't even been ten months, yet you two have this bond, this trust, like a couple that's already weathered years together. But at the same time, you flirt like newlyweds putting on a show for everyone."

"W-we do not put on a show!"

"Then you do it unconsciously. I see, I see. But I have to say, despite all your married-couple energy, your relationship is about as wholesome and platonic as they come."

"Chitose-san…"

"Okay, okay, my bad."

Of course, even as close as they were, Mahiru had never told Chitose what she and Amane had or hadn't experienced as lovers—out of respect for him. Still, Chitose understood well enough that nothing of that kind had happened, which was precisely why she teased Mahiru about it like this.

…I'm not nearly as innocent as Chitose-san seems to think.

It was true that she and Amane hadn't crossed the line that many boys and girls their age might rush to step over. She had told Chitose that much—that he cherished her enough to promise he wouldn't rush things. But she hadn't shared what had actually happened that day. How Amane had touched her, how they had come to know each other more deeply.

Just remembering it made her cheeks burn with embarrassment. Chitose, however, mistook her flustered expression for bashfulness at being teased and, grinning broadly, cooed, "You precious little thing!"

Mahiru chose not to correct that misunderstanding. She simply kept those memories tucked away in her own heart, while the sound of Chitose's

cheerful laughter rang warmly in her ears.

"By the way, is there anything about Amane you ever get dissatisfied with?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, I know you're head over heels for him, but isn't there at least one thing that makes you think, 'Ugh, he's so hopeless?' To me, it feels like he's been correcting his flaws so quickly it's almost irritating."

"Irritating? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you know. He works ridiculously hard to measure up to you, and since he's always been diligent and serious, he just soaks things up like a sponge and improves insanely quickly."

"Amane-kun is stubborn, and he's the type who'll keep going until he's satisfied with his results."

Mahiru couldn't quite understand why Chitose had used the word *"irritating,"* but she had to admit that her friend was right. Amane never failed to correct his shortcomings through sheer effort.

He had told her directly, *"I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because, if I'm going to stand beside you, this is the kind of person I want to be."* And in truth, Mahiru had seen how those little things that once gave her pause were gradually disappearing.

"The power of love strikes again," Chitose added.

"…J-just to be clear, Amane-kun says he's doing it for himself."

"Sure, but love's what drives him to do it… And now he can do pretty much anything, right?"

"Well, it would certainly be harder to find something he *can't* do in daily life, yes."

Truly, compared to when she had first met him, the difference was striking. One may doubt he was the same person.

Amane, who once couldn't keep his room in order, with clothes and magazines scattered across the floor and the windows blanketed in dust, had grown to the point where he could now keep his home spotless on his own. Nothing unnecessary cluttered the floor, and even a finger run along the table or window frames would find not a speck of dust.

His cooking, once so poor that an omelet turned into scrambled eggs,

had evolved into careful meal planning that balanced nutrition, with dishes that were not only edible but genuinely delicious.

Where once he hardly cared for his appearance, he now never neglected the care of his hair and skin. The frail, slouching figure he used to be had been reshaped through training into something sturdy and reliable, someone who stood tall and faced forward.

And beyond all that, Amane never stopped working on himself, steadily improving areas he was lacking. That straightforward determination was one of the things Mahiru loved most about him.

"That hopeless mess he used to be is ancient history then. Now he's practically prime boyfriend material. Honestly, his only obvious flaw left is being the king of cowards," Chitose said.

"Amane-kun would get mad if he heard you say that."

"But he is a coward."

"…He's simply cautious and respectful toward me."

"That's his strength and weakness at the same time. Don't you secretly wish he'd be a bit more forceful?"

"F-forceful…?"

"Yeah, like he could go, 'Keep your eyes on me…' then do a wall slam."

"I'm always looking at Amane-kun already, and why would he need to strike the wall…?"

"It's not literal, but I see, I see—you're as crazy in love with Amane as ever. So then, I dunno…what would you do if he got carried away and pushed you down?"

"H-he would never do something like…"

…that. Mahiru couldn't bring herself to finish her sentence.

Amane was indeed a gentleman—calm, considerate, endlessly attentive. But as he often reminded her himself, he was also nothing more and nothing less than a perfectly healthy high school boy.

There were times, after kisses or tender touches, when their arousal grew, his restraint loosened, and his hands seemed tempted to wander somewhere more private. There had even been moments when the two of them, overwhelmed, collapsed together onto the sofa.

But he never forced anything. Each time, he paused to ask for her

consent, proving again just how earnest and gentlemanly he truly was. Mahiru faltered midsentence, and Chitose, shocked, looked back at her with wide eyes. Then, slowly, an unmistakably amused gleam began to color her expression.

"*Never?*" she pressed.

"…Maybe he would a little bit."

"Oh my."

"Please don't look at me like that."

"Oooh my."

"Chitose-san."

"Sorry, sorry. So then he actually does push you down, huh?"

"Not to do what you're imagining!"

Mahiru raised her voice to cut her off, certain that whatever picture Chitose had conjured was far more risqué than what they actually did. Even so, that mischievous grin never left Chitose's face.

"Hmmm. So he does get a little handsy."

"Chitose-san!"

"Okay, okay, my bad. Honestly, I think it's perfectly natural for a teenage boy, but at the same time, I still wonder if that's really enough for him," Chitose said before adding, "He's got some serious self-control. Ikkun could stand to learn a thing or two, honestly," she said with a sigh, sounding exasperated yet oddly impressed.

Is he that desperate for Chitose-san…? That last remark made Mahiru's thoughts jump somewhere she didn't want them to go. Flustered, she shoved the idea away. She took a deep breath, then parted her lips to speak.

"…Amane-kun is a man who keeps his promises. He would never pressure me."

"Which is, like I said before, both a strength and a weakness. With Captain Commitment being as determined as he is, doesn't it make you feel half-secure and half-*insecure* about your own appeal?"

Chitose struck right at the heart of something Mahiru had once worried over, leaving her unable to respond.

Mahiru had never questioned her own so-called sex appeal. She'd endured her share of lecherous stares and overheard plenty of crude

remarks. She believed that both her inner and outer self were things worth refining, and she always showed the corresponding effort to bring out the best qualities of both.

It wasn't something she felt especially proud of, but she was well aware, thanks in part to genetics, that her looks were more than sufficient.

And yet, that was exactly why Amane's restraint had once made her uneasy. He treated her so tenderly, so reverently, that at the time, she couldn't help but wonder: *Does he even desire anything more than kisses?*

Of course, that fear had later been thoroughly buried by his words, his actions, and, most undeniably, by how his *body* reacts.

"See what I mean?" Chitose followed up.

"…Even so, Amane-kun is very much a man. I, being at his side, know that better than anyone."

"Ahh, so he's nice and healthy down below. Great news."

"Chitose-san?"

"I'll mind my words. Sorry."

How can she say things like that… Mahiru shot her a scolding glare.

Chitose just raised a hand beside her head in response and waved it lightly in surrender.

Mahiru had been deliberately vague, and while Chitose hadn't been outright vulgar, her blunt phrasing was mortifying nonetheless. Yet Chitose didn't seem to mind it, as if such talk meant nothing to her.

Their gap in experience was showing all too clearly. A prickling itch crawled across Mahiru's back, and to cover her embarrassment, she glared at Chitose even harder.

"What about you, Chitose-san?"

"Me?"

"You've been with Akazawa-san for quite some time now. Surely being so close must come with its own frustrations now and then?"

Chitose had been poking at sensitive topic after sensitive topic, so Mahiru felt it was only fair to hear some things back. She wasn't after complaints, but after what had happened over New Year's, she thought it wiser to know if anything was simmering before it boiled over. Of course, it was also part payback for earlier. But more than that, Mahiru was

genuinely concerned.

Chitose nodded immediately, much to Mahiru's surprise.

"About Ikkun? Oh, *too* many it's ridiculous."

"Th-that's unexpected."

"It shouldn't be? But maybe it's not something you can tell from the outside. You know how Ikkun is—he gets along with everyone, and somehow manages to handle just about anything without much fuss."

Chitose wasn't wrong. To Mahiru, Itsuki came across as someone with sharp social instincts who was quick to read the room and exceptionally skilled at slipping right into people's comfort zones. He had a knack for finding the fine line between friendly and intrusive and never crossing it.

On top of that, even when he acted like a clown, he was calm and skillful in how he handled situations. That was the impression Mahiru had of him.

Amane, who was even closer to him, had once said: *"He's cheerful and acts like a goof, but deep down he's quiet, patient, and when he's having a tough time, he clams up and gets too polite to accept people's help. Which makes him a clever idiot."* It was a harsh description, but Mahiru had to agree that there was truth to it…likely because she recognized the same tendencies in herself.

If that was Amane's take, Mahiru wondered what Chitose thought as Itsuki's girlfriend.

"Ikkun looks like a social butterfly to you, right?" Chitose asked.

"Yes, I would say so."

"He definitely is one, but…how should I put it… He's insanely good at reading the room, but he's *so* good at it that he ends up managing the atmosphere. I don't think he does this deliberately, but it's like he can't help trying to control it. That's both one of his strengths and one of his flaws. He hardly lets his true feelings show—he just acts the way that best suits the moment." Chitose sighed, then clarified, "Of course, he's not like that around all of us. Lots of people think Ikkun's super friendly, cheerful, lively, and even a little dazzling. But at his core, he's actually kind of timid and, if anything, he's a bit closed off and not much of a people person. He really hates it when someone tries to invade his space. That's why he prefers to be the one holding the reins. It's like he takes action to protect his territory

and prevent people from getting too close. Kind of like when people extend their front garden so no one gets to their house."

"…I understand what you're trying to say."

As a matter of fact, Mahiru was more similar to Itsuki than Amane was.

Because he didn't want anyone near that soft, fragile part of himself, he crafted an outward persona to hide behind. A likable mask that kept everyone at arm's length, making sure no footprints ever marred the untouched soil within.

And so, he had made himself lonely. He had hollowed himself out by the solitude he had chosen, foolishly lamenting that no one truly saw him, even though he refused to let anyone in.

Mahiru knew that feeling well. She had lived through such a phase herself. But now, it was different. Thanks to Amane, she had changed.

"Amane and Ikkun might seem similar, but they're actually complete opposites, you know? Amane built a tall wall around him that screamed, 'Stay away. Don't come near me.' But once you actually get to know him, he's more than happy to let you inside that wall. You, Mahirun, are closer to Ikkun. Thing is, instead of words, you draw the line with your attitude, making sure no one steps past it. It's like you smile politely to keep that boundary in place."

After spending time with Chitose, Mahiru often realized just how closely the girl observed the personalities of those around her. It was almost startling how well she could see straight into someone's essence and gauge exactly where to set the distance. That was why, before Mahiru even knew it, Chitose had slipped past her boundaries and made herself comfortable in her inner circle. She had managed to do that without causing Mahiru any discomfort.

"Ikkun hardly ever lets anyone all the way into his room. Even if you're close friends, most of the time you only get as far as the entryway—or maybe the living room if you're lucky. And if he does let you into his room, he's the type who'll still tuck things away in the closet where no one can see. And I don't think that's a good way to live," Chitose muttered in a serious voice.

She took a sip from her now-cold green tea to wet her lips.

“Also, Ikkun loves to handle his problems on his own, so he hides stuff like crazy. And the worst part is he’s so good at hiding it that it makes me mad.”

“Hehe. But didn’t you two talk it out the other day?” Mahiru asked.

“We did. I told him straight up that if he tries to shoulder things on his own again, I’ll kick him in the nuts.”

It sounded like Chitose had sat down with Itsuki and talked through her worries, frustrations, and plans after his silence over New Year’s. So when Mahiru learned that Chitose had promised a pretty aggressive punishment, her cheek twitched. Knowing that Chitose still ran regularly to keep her fitness and leg strength even though she wasn’t on the track team anymore, Mahiru could easily picture how powerful a kick she could deliver. Judging by the way she spoke, Chitose wouldn’t hold back, and should she actually carry out the penalty, Itsuki was going to be in for a world of hurt.

“With your leg strength, wouldn’t that be a little dangerous, Chitose-san?”

“He would only have himself to blame.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Chitose was a usually tolerant person who rarely lost her temper, so if Itsuki had pushed her so far as to do that, the blame almost certainly lay with him. If he kept repeating the very things she had asked him not to do, then it was only natural he’d face some form of punishment.

She turned her head with a little *hmph* like a sulking child, though she wasn’t genuinely upset. If anything, it looked as though she believed Itsuki wouldn’t stick to keeping secrets again. The quiet trust she placed in him was endearing to see.

“Then, let’s see… There’s also how Ikkun pretends he’s all tough.”

“Isn’t it normal for boys to put on a brave face in front of the girl they like?”

“Sure, but he takes it way too far. Like seriously, he won’t even show weakness to Amane. Half the time, his goofy grin is just a cover-up to hide how he really feels. It annoys the heck out of me when he does that.”

“I never expected you to be so harsh on Akazawa-san.”

“Well, it’s one of those… Just because you like someone doesn’t mean

you should blindly agree with everything they do. Pretending nothing's wrong when he's hurt is one of Ikkun's worst habits. He's gotten a little better lately, at least…or maybe I should say he'd *better* have gotten better, after the talk we had."

Although he didn't commit to it, Itsuki had still come all the way to Amane's area on New Year's Eve because he couldn't hold in his frustration any longer. Considering that, Mahiru had to agree.

Amane also had a habit of keeping his troubles to himself. But if Mahiru grew worried, he would always put it into words for her. That was where he differed from Itsuki. In Amane's case, he couldn't keep a secret even if he tried. He was honest to a fault, straightforward, and a very poor keeper of his secrets.

"There are definitely things I don't like, but they aren't all flaws that I think he should try to change. Sometimes they even become good qualities. So yeah, I've got my complaints, but it doesn't change the fact that I love him. You feel the same way, right, Mahirun?"

"…Yes, I do."

Mahiru could say with pride that she loved everything about Amane. But living alongside him had made her keenly aware that he wasn't without his faults.

For better or worse, he tended to put her above all else. There were times when she felt a tad uneasy, knowing that if it ever came down to weighing Mahiru against himself, he would tip the scale in her favor without a second thought.

She was overjoyed to feel such intense love, but at times she wished Amane would put himself first. If his selflessness ever left him hurt or worn down, that pain would weigh on Mahiru too. That was why she had told him, more than once, not to go too far.

And then there was the way he so honestly voiced his affection ever since they had started dating. It was wonderful, yet so straightforward that it left her flustered and squirming from both delight and embarrassment, which was not ideal.

Thinking back on it now, the size of Amane's love for her hit her all over again, and Mahiru could feel her body heat up.

Chitose said, “Ah, love,” with a knowing smile upon seeing her reaction.

“Well, Ikkun has reflected on his actions, so I think from now on he’ll talk things through with me instead of hiding them.”

There was no trace of doubt on Chitose’s face as she said this.

Mahiru felt she could finally smile in relief, knowing how unsteady her emotions had been over New Year’s.

“I believe the two of you can communicate properly now. Don’t you agree?”

“Yeah. Though if he ever tries to hide something again…that’ll be it. No third chances.”

“Hehe. I doubt you’ll have to worry about that.”

“I’d like to believe I won’t too.”

I don’t think Akazawa-san will do it again, Mahiru thought with a strange sense of certainty, and, using Chitose’s blissful expression as a sort of side dish to her drink, she sipped at the completely cooled green tea.

Just Accept Things for What They Are

To Itsuki, Amane was a living embodiment of a certain ideal. And although it had more to do with his environment than his personality, Itsuki still envied him with every fiber of his being. He would have given anything to have what Amane had.

His friend had been blessed with a truly fortunate family life. Perhaps being an only child played a part, but even to an outsider like Itsuki, it was clear that Amane's parents adored him and had raised him with respect for his individuality. He carried himself with the confidence and awareness that came from knowing, without a shadow of a doubt, that he was his parents' treasure. He never once doubted their love, even during the times when he doubted himself.

It was easy to see that his parents loved him more than the world, and that he, in turn, loved and respected them back. It looked so natural, so ordinary, yet it was anything but. Each time Itsuki caught sight of that dazzling bond, he found himself quietly grinding his teeth.

Not a moment passed that he didn't feel envious.

More than once, Itsuki had compared his father's expression to Shuuto's in his mind, wondering with a bitter face why his own parents had to be so different.

It wasn't like he had never felt Daiki's love. Itsuki believed that, in his own way, Daiki did care for him. But that affection was not familial love, nor was it even love for him as his own individual. His father was attached to his image of an ideal son, a doll that matched the picture in his mind.

No, even that was debatable.

It was as if he were only a stand-in for that doll, nothing more than a

spare tucked away in storage with the thought of, *Eh, maybe I'll need this someday?* Otherwise, how could he explain the fact that his father only paid attention to him after his older brother had practically run away from home? If his brother had never defied Daiki, Itsuki was certain he would have been left neglected all along.

Itsuki didn't believe unconditional love from a parent existed. From the moment he was old enough to understand the world, all he ever saw was his brother being driven through heir-training, while their father, being absorbed in that very training, hardly spared him a glance. Sometimes he even wondered if his father had tossed him aside for being too useless to him.

He didn't know what the truth really was, but at the very least, until his brother rebelled, Itsuki had only been given the bare minimum of such education. Only after his brother left did the harsh training begin. Surely Daiki's "love" was something he could only grant to someone in whom he saw himself reflected, someone who would run the rest of his life's race for him. And if that was what his love was, then it could hardly be called unconditional.

Unconditional love had to be…yes, something like what Amane got from his parents.

That very thought stirred Itsuki's head and chest, and a whirl of murky emotions swirled round and round in his mind.

He definitely didn't hate Amane. Far from it. As a person, he found him genuinely admirable.

Sure, his tongue could be a little sharp at times, but he was a gentle, quiet, and shy boy who still couldn't help meddling out of kindness. He hated anything dishonest, and in this day and age, his straightforward purity, single-mindedness, and honesty were rare. In a different manner from Yuuta, Amane was a fine young man who wore the marks of a good upbringing. Even just being his friend, Itsuki could tell as much. He was the kind of person who was super comfortable to be with.

Itsuki could never hate him. If anything—he loved him. He really did. And yet, deep in his chest, a faint ember of resentment flickered to life. It was an ungovernable feeling, one far beyond his control. Scorched,

blackened feelings smoldered quietly, like embers refusing to die out. And it wasn't Amane's fault. No, the blame lay with Itsuki himself, for looking at his own friend with such ugly emotions.

Amane had done nothing wrong. Never once flaunting what he had, he was simply loved by his parents as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and he loved them back in kind. That was all. A bond both beautiful and precious. An ideal parent-child relationship, the sort one would naturally wish to have.

And Itsuki was jealous. Jealous that Amane's life embodied that ideal environment.

He knew full well it was a selfish, unilateral emotion. No matter how strained his relationship with his own father was, it didn't justify envying, resenting, and even hating another for what they had. He had even laughed at himself more than once at the sheer foolishness of it all. The very fact that he harbored these feelings only drove home how wretched he was as a person.

Alongside the envy festering in the depths of his heart clung a mire of self-loathing. No doubt, the cause was his New Year's Eve conversation with Shuuto. Every word he spoke, every expression he gave, and every gesture he made drove Itsuki to a single conclusion.

So this is what an ideal parent looks like…?

It's not fair.

Put into words, it was childish, even pathetic. And yet, he still thought it wasn't fair. Seeing someone have something he could never attain no matter how hard he tried made him jealous beyond belief.

Amane had gone so far as to pour his heart into helping him, into encouraging him, and into looking after him together with Chitose. And in spite of all that, that smoldering ember deep within his chest refused to die, staining the pure goodwill he felt toward his friend with a muddy blot of resentment ink.

He knew these emotions were no better than a child's tantrum, and that simply harboring them made him an ugly or even despicable person. But that didn't mean he could make it stop. With every rebuke Daiki flung at him, another drop would fall…then another…and another. He knew better

than to compare, and yet his mind did it anyway, driving him to envy, and then to spiral into self-loathing.

As Itsuki gritted his teeth to force down the murk churning inside him, a worried voice cut through his thoughts.

"You look like you've got something on your mind. Something happen again?"

Itsuki had been killing time chatting with Amane at a fast-food joint since he wasn't working today. But since Itsuki suddenly fell quiet halfway through, Amane gave him a concerned look.

"Was it that obvious?" Itsuki asked in return.

"Super obvious. I suggest you either clear your face before Chitose notices or just tell her what's wrong. I don't see her forgiving you if you keep another secret from her."

Even Amane, who was usually quick to read people, couldn't quite figure out what was bothering him and assumed it had something to do with Chitose. Given recent events, that guess had some footing, and the fact that Itsuki let his worries show when he was alone with Amane only reinforced it.

"Ehh…it's some like, really personal stuff."

"Then I guess I shouldn't ask."

"Aaaah… Mm-hmm. Yeah."

Amane was probably right. Who in their right mind would want to be told that their own friend was jealous of them? This wasn't a matter Amane could solve, whether Itsuki told him or not. If anything, telling him would only give Amane another thing to worry about.

And would Itsuki feel any lighter for having confessed? Unlikely. He had no urge to say anything that might jeopardize their friendship. And yet…some ugly part of him still wanted to hurl those filthy feelings at his friend who had everything he lacked. To throw it all at Amane, even if it meant being hated for it… No—maybe that was exactly what Itsuki really wanted. Maybe he longed for the reassurance of being punished and having his own ugly feelings despised.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Amane asked, baffled.

"I'm hesitating because if I say it, it might change things between us."

“Sounds like something big?”

“No, it’s something small. Petty, really.”

It was nothing more than a selfish, petty, and pathetic worry.

“Hey, uh…”

“What’s up?”

“I, uh…like you, Amane,” Itsuki said with a dead-serious expression.

Amane immediately slid back in his chair.

Itsuki gave him a crooked smile. “Dude, don’t just scoot away in silence—it’s not like that. I’ve already got Chi, you know. I’m not confessing my love to you.”

“You almost made my skin crawl.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. The real point starts here.”

Granted, Itsuki had phrased it in a way that practically begged for misunderstanding, so telling Amane not to jump the gun was a bit unreasonable. Still, Amane leaned in, ready to listen.

“I mean, I do like you, but yeah,” Itsuki added.

“Obviously. We wouldn’t be friends if you hated me.”

“…So what if I told you there’ve been times I did?”

Itsuki had agonized over whether to get it off his chest or keep it to himself. This was a confession that might drive a wedge between them and had the power to decide the future of their friendship. Even if their friendship shattered or was never the same way again, Itsuki had already resolved to accept that outcome without complaint. So then, with no small amount of fear, he finally told Amane.

“Oh. I see.”

That was the only reply he got. Plain and straightforward.

No shock, no anger—just Amane’s regular old expression as he accepted Itsuki’s words without judging.

“Man, that’s way too casual a reaction.”

“Wouldn’t it be scarier if you started screaming, ‘I love you! You’re the best! I can’t live without you!’? My skin would *actually* crawl.”

“Guess so, yeah.”

Amane, who so often threw sharp as knives remarks at Itsuki, would definitely be creeped out if Itsuki ever did something like that. Failing that,

he would assume that Itsuki was sick in the head. That was just who he was.

Itsuki was the one left rattled, surprised at how easily Amane accepted his confession without a hint of hesitation or pain. Amane, on the other hand, only wore a look softer than usual as he calmly said, “And?” to urge him on.

“…I’ll be honest, I don’t even know if ‘hate’ is the right word. Maybe saying I envy you would be better. Or that I am jealous.”

“Ah. So you’re talking about my parents.”

“Sometimes you’re a little too quick to catch on, you know that?”

“Not really? That’s about the only thing I’ve got worth envying.”

Amane laughed brightly, probably not even realizing how he came across at times like this.

Sure, his family situation was what Itsuki envied most, but there were plenty of other things he wished he had as well. Still, it all stayed within the bounds of simple envy. But since that was besides the point right now, Itsuki didn’t chase him up on his comment.

I already knew it, but this guy is unbelievable…

“So anyway… Envy and jealousy are a little different, don’t you think? Jealousy means you begrudge them.”

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

Envy meant hoping to attain the same thing for yourself, whereas jealousy meant resenting the person who already had that thing. It didn’t matter how; just the fact that they possessed it made them seem undeservingly lucky.

And no matter how foolish Itsuki knew that was, he couldn’t keep those feelings down.

“The truth is, I can’t help feeling jealous or even begrudge you when I’m faced with differences between us that I can never do anything about, no matter how hard I try. But it’s not like you’ve done anything wrong, and it’s not something I can change either, so these built-up feelings just have nowhere to go. If I could change my old man, I would—but I can’t. Even confronting him man-to-man didn’t work. And that’s why those awful feelings kept spinning around in my head this whole time.”

“Yeah… After all, this is something neither of us can do anything about.”

Of course, Itsuki was still doing his best to change himself to reshape his environment, but that was a separate matter entirely. No matter what he did, he still envied Amane. He still resented him. If he had Amane’s parents, he wouldn’t have had to endure so much pain. He could have focused his strength on something else. He could have prevented Chitose from getting hurt.

It was nothing more than a faraway dream, an unattainable fantasy he could never grasp, yet he couldn’t stop himself from wishing he could.

“But it’s pathetic and ugly to get so jealous about a friend. I hate myself more for it.”

“Right. And this isn’t you asking me to fix it or anything, right?”

“Nah. I know this isn’t something I should have told you…but like, keeping it bottled up to fester inside me is just as much of a hell to me. Still, I also knew that it could make you feel awful if I just dropped it on you out of nowhere, so I went back and forth tons of times over whether to tell you or not.”

Itsuki was no idiot—he knew saying all this would only put Amane in a difficult spot. It would’ve been far kinder to keep it to himself. After all, admitting that he’d felt such a way toward a trusted friend could only bother him. And yet, he’d gone ahead and thrown it at Amane anyway. He knew how selfish this was, and had already resigned himself to being despised or scolded for it.

But Amane only sat there with an expression of utter calmness.

“I’m not hurt or anything, by the way. Isn’t that just how the cookie crumbles?”

“How the cookie crumbles…?”

“Relationships aren’t simple things. Just because we’re friends doesn’t mean you’ll only ever feel good things about me. It’s normal to have stuff you don’t like, too. And if it’s about something outside my control, then there’s no point in me getting caught up over it, is there?” Amane said, his tone calm and casual. He then added, “If I made a mistake of some sort, then sure, I’d reflect on or feel remorse for what I did.”

Amane wore a smile so bright and easygoing that it almost felt

refreshing.

"Or do you mean that you want to cut ties with me? Or that you hate me so much you don't even want to talk anymore?" he then asked, looking Itsuki in the eyes.

"Of course not."

"Then no harm done, right? Just wrestle with it until you can make peace with yourself."

Amane's attitude remained endlessly calm and straightforward, like he was completely unbothered by Itsuki's feelings. Yet Amane still watched over him with a kind distance. And for some reason, that made Itsuki want to cry.

In a way, it would have been easier for Itsuki had Amane just blamed him. But he neither accused nor excused him. He simply stayed there with him, waiting until Itsuki could swallow down his own feelings.

It was infuriating how blindingly bright he seemed.

"…Something about this pisses me off," Itsuki admitted.

"What did I even do?"

"Everything."

It was moments like this that made Itsuki jealous of Amane all over again.

"Ugh… I swear, everything makes me hate myself. My own small-mindedness, my ugliness, my stupidity—everything."

"You've got a thing for putting yourself down today."

"Can you blame me? I'm an idiot."

"Well, yeah, you are an idiot."

"Harsh!"

Amane had just called him an idiot straight to his face, but Itsuki knew he didn't mean it as an insult.

As he watched Amane laugh and sip his matcha shake, Itsuki felt as though a weight had lifted off his chest. Sometimes, being teased and joked with like that was exactly what he needed. Itsuki took a sip of his now lukewarm coffee blend, feeling inwardly grateful that Amane knew how best to act.

"Anyway, don't overthink it. I've got things I don't like about you too, so

you're not alone," Amane chuckled. Noticing that Itsuki had calmed down, he casually revealed the truth.

Yeah, that figures, Itsuki thought. He wasn't surprised, but knowing how tolerant Amane usually was, it did make him genuinely wonder, *What on earth does he find annoying about me?*

"Hmph. Wait, lemme guess… Is it that I get carried away!?"

"At least you're aware of it… But no, I wouldn't say I hate that, though there are times I kinda wanna smack you for it."

"Why so violent!? Okay, then is it that I can be loud?"

"Let me add that to the list, actually."

"Wow, harsh! What is it then…?"

Sure, Itsuki could list plenty of his own flaws if he wanted to, but he couldn't think of many that Amane would actually dislike. He'd guessed Amane only got bothered by things that directly affected him—but apparently, that wasn't the case.

"I don't like that you convince yourself that someone will hate you, but then give up and tell yourself it can't be helped? This is rich coming from me, but you've got this habit of preparing yourself to give up when things get worse. You're more timid than I am, always setting up a mental safety net so you won't feel hurt."

It immediately struck Itsuki. That was exactly what he both liked and disliked about Amane. He couldn't even form a response. His mouth just opened and closed, passing through nothing but his breath. Meanwhile, Amane, ever unruffled, looked at him with a face of disbelief.

"You assume I'd judge you for something like that? That just shows how little you actually understand me. And you really think I'd get hurt over something so petty? Itsuki, you're just getting hurt over things you make up in your own head."

"…You're so damn annoying."

That was all Itsuki could manage in reply.

"Yeah, sure, whatever. You're gonna need more than that to hurt me."

"Annoooying. Idiot of idiots."

"Big words too hard for you?"

"A little empathy too much for you?"

If Chitose had been there, she'd probably have sighed in their faces and asked if they were children. But before long, their silly back-and-forth got the better of them, and both of them ended up laughing.

Itsuki still felt envious of Amane, and the feeling pricked a weak spot deep in his chest even now. But that was nothing compared to how much Itsuki liked and respected Amane as a person. He admired his gentle kind of strength—how he could accept someone's ugly emotions, kneed them down with kindness, and ease the pain until it was gone.

"I don't see why we can't stay friends even with those feelings. At the end of the day, that's just how friendship works," Amane mused.

"Love ya, dude."

"Ew, gross."

"Okay, meanie."

"Yup, so true, I'm a super big meanie. Hate me for it if you wanna."

"You're HELLA annoying!"

"Just realizing that now?"

"I've known for ages!"

Itsuki was grateful that Amane would still joke around with him like this, but it was honestly still a little annoying. So he picked up one of the soggy fries left on the tray and turned away, only to hear Amane laugh quietly somewhere just outside his view.

Operation: Amane's Big Makeover

Amane had never cared much about his appearance.

Of course, he paid attention to basic hygiene and kept himself presentable, but beyond that, he never saw the point in doing anything extra. As long as he wasn't overweight or too skinny, stayed clean, and could get through school without bothering anyone, that was good enough for him. The idea of trying to be popular or attractive had never once crossed his mind.

That all changed around the time he fell for Mahiru.

Ever since he wanted to earn his spot by her side, Amane had come to realize that, as he was, he'd only embarrass her. The thought made him feel pathetic, even ashamed of himself. That was why he began working out, determined to become someone he wouldn't be embarrassed to be. He started paying attention to skincare and even chose clothes that made him look at least pretty good.

He never thought of it as something he was doing for Mahiru. It was for himself, for the pride of being able to stand proud next to her. Even now that they were dating, that effort hadn't stopped. If anything, he pushed himself harder than ever. Part of it was simply wanting to be someone he could respect, but another part was because seeing Mahiru smile made it all worthwhile.

"Didn't think you were into those kinds of magazines," Itsuki remarked, looking surprised.

They had both stopped by the bookstore to pick up some study guides, and while browsing, Amane had casually grabbed a men's fashion magazine featuring the latest trends on its cover.

Itsuki knew full well that Amane had never been one to care much about clothes, so seeing him flip through a fashion magazine must've come as a shock.

As Amane skimmed through the pages, he found articles on trendy outfits and hairstyling tips, as well as some elaborate looks that were way outside his comfort zone.

So this kind of style's in right now, huh…? he thought idly. *I wonder what kind of hairstyle Mahiru likes.*

When he caught sight of Itsuki grinning at him, Amane promptly shut the magazine with a soft thud.

"I wouldn't say I'm *into* them, but you know, Mahiru does love me, so…"

"Oh great, here we go again…" Itsuki groaned.

"Nah, I was just stating facts, not bragging. You know as well as I do that Mahiru loves me."

Amane still felt embarrassed to admit it himself, but there was no denying the truth—Mahiru truly loved him, sincerely and wholeheartedly. It was something he and everyone around them knew.

"You know how she feels about me, right? When it comes down to what exactly she likes, I'm pretty sure it's mostly my personality, and she actually tells me that a lot herself. But she also says she likes how I look, too."

"Yeah, that sounds like Shiina-san all right. Makes sense that when she falls for someone, she falls for the whole package."

"I'm sure she's seeing me through the eyes of love, but…it still feels good to hear her say she loves me, you know?"

Amane couldn't help thinking Mahiru might be idealizing him a bit, or even a whole lot. But even so, it seemed she genuinely liked his appearance. Ever since he started taking better care of himself, she'd only grown fonder, and whenever he dressed up to go out, she would beam and start snapping pictures with a bright smile. That much alone made it clear how much she liked how he looked.

If Mahiru said she loved the way he appeared, then it would stand to reason that he'd want to look even better for her. At least as much as he could manage.

"Is it weird that I want to figure out what kind of look Mahiru likes

best?"

"Nyyope? It just makes me think you're a real hard worker, not weird," Itsuki replied with an amused grin.

"That's good. I can't just expect her to keep liking me if I never try, you know? And anyway, I want to be a guy who can stand beside her with confidence, and if I can make her happy as a bonus, that's even better."

Sure, Mahiru would probably still love him even if he got lazy with his appearance. But if he kept that up, he doubted her feelings would stay as strong as they were now. Sooner or later, she might become disillusioned, thinking he was simply a lazy person. More than that, Amane couldn't stand the thought of looking untidy while standing next to her. He loved seeing Mahiru smile more than anything else. Compared to that, the effort it took to keep himself presentable was nothing, and it didn't even feel like work to begin with.

"Dang."

"What's that 'dang' supposed to mean?"

"Nothin', just thinking that you're practically overflowing with love."

"Then I'm glad. If even other people can tell, that can only mean Mahiru's picking up on it too."

Amane always tried to express his feelings for Mahiru both through words and actions, but he could never be entirely sure how much of that actually reached her unless she said so herself. However, if even outsiders like Itsuki could see it that clearly, then it was safe to assume Mahiru felt it too. That was enough to put his mind at ease.

Amane brushed off Itsuki's comment, which was probably partly teasing anyway. Itsuki frowned and stared at him coldly in disbelief.

"What's with that look? Like you think I'm no fun to tease anymore."

"Heh, so you noticed."

"Don't think I'm gonna let you keep making fun of me forever."

If someone kept poking fun at his relationship with Mahiru, Amane would eventually adapt.

"So anyway, I figured I might as well try to find which look Mahiru likes best on me. I don't experiment with my hairstyle much, so I thought I'd study up a bit with magazines like this."

Amane lacked much fashion sense to begin with, and he had only enough grooming skill to switch his hairstyle when the situation called for it. So he decided it might be a good time to try a fresh new style.

He figured he'd experiment with a few hairdos that suited the length and thickness of his hair, and if one of them turned out well, maybe show it to Mahiru. But when he said that, Itsuki just stared at him with a sympathetic look.

"Poor Shiina-san."

"…You mean, instead of wasting time on this, I should just focus on her directly?"

"No, I'm saying Shiina-san's got her hands full 'cause her boyfriend's out here trying to give her a heart attack."

"You're exaggerating."

Amane didn't think a simple change in hairstyle would be enough to get Mahiru that worked up, but judging by the look on Itsuki's face, he thought otherwise.

"You already know Shiina-san's crazy in love with you, and yet here you are trying to completely blow her socks off."

"And that's bad?"

"No, it's not bad; it's actually kinda sweet. It's just that…you know how you go all in on something once you decide to do it?"

"Yeah. If I'm gonna do it, might as well do it right."

"I'm just saying that if you get super serious, Shiina-san wouldn't know what hit her."

"Come on, it's not that big a deal, is it? Just look at what I've got to work with here."

Itsuki gave that warning knowing that Mahiru loved Amane from the bottom of her heart and liked his appearance. Even so, Amane didn't think a slight change in how he looked would make that much difference.

Unless I shaved it all off, I don't think my impression would change all that much, Amane thought as he ran a hand through his hair, which, with Mahiru's help, he had been taking meticulous care of.

Unable to believe what he was seeing, Itsuki groaned, then muttered "Unbelievable…" under his breath.

“What?”

“…Look, I’ll just be straight with you. You’re actually pretty good-looking, you know? And before you start comparing yourself to Yuuta, don’t. That guy’s basically the Tokyo University of looks.”

“Getting complimented by you makes my skin crawl, but thanks, I guess. I’ll credit my parents’ genes for that one.”

Amane would never call himself handsome, but he knew that he’d inherited many qualities from his good-looking parents, Shuuto and Shihoko. He figured his face was at least decently chiseled.

Even so, Yuuta was in a league of his own, and, frankly, Itsuki had no right to talk, as he was objectively attractive himself. Amane thought it was a bit unfair coming from someone like him.

Itsuki could tell that Amane wasn’t entirely convinced, so he sighed and then muttered, “You’re such a dullard sometimes” under his breath.

“Okay, so imagine you dolled yourself up how Shiina-san likes and then spoiled her. She’d implode.”

“Implode?”

“Yeah. She’d probably freeze up and stop functioning for a while. Seems she doesn’t handle surprises well.”

“True that. She’s pretty bad with them.”

Even setting aside any talk about his looks, Itsuki had a point—Mahiru really was weak to surprises. Maybe it was because she usually maintained such impeccable composure, but when she was caught off guard, that composure would crumble completely.

That weakness was born from her immeasurable love for him, and it honestly worried Amane a little.

“I actually feel bad for Shiina-san sometimes…for having a boyfriend like you.”

“Gee, my bad. I am trying to make her happy in my own way, believe it or not.”

“Just don’t push her past her limit, all right? She’s a timid girl, so one good hit and she’ll go boom.”

“‘Boom,’ seriously?”

“Also, try being a little more aware of things.”

“I already know what kind of stuff Mahiru likes, so I’ll be careful.”

“That too, but not what I meant.”

“…Huh? What, then?”

Amane looked at him, perplexed. Itsuki, fed up, simply shrugged in response.

Deciding it wasn’t worth arguing over, Amane lightly kicked the heel of Itsuki’s shoe, picked up a few magazines that might suit him, and headed for the register.

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“So I’ve done some digging,” Chitose declared.

A few days earlier, Itsuki had apparently told Chitose about Amane’s plan, which, oddly enough, got her all fired up. She had exclaimed, *“Heh, that sounds hilarious! Let’s do it, let’s do it!”* and with her help, they succeeded in finding out what hairstyle Mahiru liked.

Today was a public holiday, and since Amane hadn’t scheduled any shifts, he had the day off. Mahiru, on the other hand, had booked a morning appointment at a beauty salon, so they were spending the first half of the day separately and planned to meet up in the afternoon for a date.

While Mahiru was out, Itsuki and Chitose decided to drop by Amane’s place. Or to be exact, they had decided to invite themselves over. Still, since he was the one asking for their help, Amane couldn’t exactly complain.

“Great work. You have my praise,” Itsuki said grandly, sinking heavily into the sofa as he sat with his arms crossed. He nodded with a look of satisfaction, like he owned the place. In reality, he was very much a guest.

“I don’t get why you’re acting all high and mighty, Ikkun,” Chitose huffed. “This started because of you, so maybe try lifting a finger, huh?”

“Wouldn’t it be weird if I asked Shiina-san what her fave hairstyle was?”

“Super weird. Her alarm bells would ring if I asked too, but I managed to make it natural somehow. I did a pretty good job, if I do say so myself.”

Chitose showed a smug little **heh, heh** expression, but she really had handled the task perfectly, so that was fine by Amane.

“I’ve got a lot I could say right now, but…thanks. Are we really doing this?” Amane asked.

The reason his friends had gone out of their way to show up at his place early on a holiday morning was none other than to pull a surprise on Mahiru. Why they were so fired up about it, Amane had absolutely no idea, but there was no mistaking that both of them were completely into it.

“Of course we are! Anything to see Mahirun’s happy face! And honestly, I just wanna see what you look like when you’re dressed to kill,” Chitose chirped.

“You’re just in it for the fun, aren’t you?”

“What else would I be in it for!? Don’t forget I was there for your good old days of zero self-care, when you couldn’t care less about your looks or yourself. But just look at you now! Mama’s so proud.”

“No one wants a parent like you,” Amane shot back flatly.

“Ehh, but I get along pretty well with Shihoko-san, don’t I?”

“…You think?” he muttered, sounding thoroughly unamused.

“There’s no need for that super obvious *ugh* face,” Chitose said with a pout.

It was true that Chitose matched his mother’s energy, especially in how both of them adored Mahiru. That aside, having her call herself his *“mom”* still made him recoil. Both she and Itsuki had watched over Amane’s growth, but that was beside the point.

Amane urged, *“Cut it out,”* with his glare, and Chitose seemed to get the message. Knowing full well that if she took things too far, Amane would toss her out, she threw up her hands in the air. “All right, fine,” she said, backing off.

“Right so, Mahirun said she likes your hair as it is now, but she also loves it when she can see some forehead,” Chitose declared.

Amane was oddly convinced by Chitose’s report.

Now that he thought about it, Mahiru always reacted whenever his forehead was visible, like after P.E. class, when he brushed his damp bangs back, or right after a shower, when his hair was pushed up and away from his face. Maybe she simply liked catching glimpses of something she didn’t usually get to see.

“But you’ll end up looking too formal for her tastes if you slick your hair back all the way. I think a style that just shows your forehead a little would suit you best. It’d brighten your face and give off a more open, charming vibe,” Chitose explained.

“Yeah, you’ve got super long bangs right now, which makes for more of a calm or cold impression than a bright one,” Itsuki noted.

“You can just say it makes me look gloomy, you know.”

“Why do you have to say it like that? …Anyway, is the reason you keep your bangs long because you don’t like people looking at you?”

“…Yeah, that might’ve been it,” Amane admitted quietly. “I guess I wanted something I could hide behind.”

He’d always liked having longer hair, but he didn’t develop the habit of letting it fall over his eyes until after the incident with Toujou.

Back then, the very idea of being seen by others would fill him with fear and disgust, so he’d done his best not to look at anyone at all. As a result, he had let a curtain of bangs fall over his eyes. Of course, he had no such fear anymore. He could interact with people normally, but he still kept his hair on the longer side out of sheer habit. His parents had even told him that short styles didn’t really suit his face to begin with, so he’d never considered changing it.

When he saw that both Itsuki and Chitose’s expressions turned cloudy, he hastily added, “I’m fine now. It’s all in the past.”

They were both the type to worry for their friends, and Amane realized belatedly that he should’ve been more considerate before bringing it up.

“You don’t feel uncomfortable with it anymore?”

“Not really… Now I’m just like, what’s the point of showing it off?”

“The main one is that Mahirun would be thrilled,” Chitose chimed in.

“Well, when you put it that way…”

“See? The second Mahirun’s involved, your logic goes straight out the window.”

“Oh, hush.”

No one knew better than he did that he had a soft spot for Mahiru, but it was still embarrassing to have his friends point it out so bluntly.

“So, I highly recommend you go with *this* hairstyle,” Chitose said, pulling

out a photo of a young male idol who looked like a kind, good-natured youth.

Even though Amane had little interest in the entertainment world, he vaguely remembered seeing the face on TV before, which meant the idol must have been relatively famous.

He sported a fresh-looking center-part hairstyle that neatly framed his face, giving him a glamorous look. It was hard to tell yet whether this style would actually suit him, but Amane had to admit—the look itself was fresh and stylish.

"Oh, yeah, this style is in fashion right now."

"Yeah, I've seen it loads on TV. And come to think of it, I've never gone for anything like it before."

"Yep, and I thought that contrast would give it more impact. And Mahirun likes it, so why not? She literally told me that this is the kind of style she wants to see," Chitose added proudly.

"…I get that, but do you really think it'd suit me?"

"Sure, probably? Not like I would know."

"Gee, how convincing."

"No, like, we won't know till you actually try it, right? Anyway, we've gotta get this all done and dusted before your little meet-up with Mahirun, so let's get a move on. The outfit I'll leave to you, Ikkun. It'd be inappropriate of me if I went snooping around in his room."

"You can count on me." Itsuki ushered Amane to his room with a smooth push and immediately rummaged through his closet.

Amane didn't fuss over his clothes, but ever since he'd started paying more attention to his appearance, he'd built up a modest but decent wardrobe. His standards had simply risen to a more respectable level, so it wasn't as though he could compare to people who actually enjoyed fashion.

Upon opening the section where Amane kept his winter clothes, Itsuki began sifting through hangers one by one, occasionally glancing back at Amane's face to gauge what might suit him before returning to the lineup.

"If that's the hairstyle you're going for, then a clean, elegant outfit should work best… You got anything that fits the bill?"

"I've got a few options that should, but not a lot. My mom keeps sending

me stuff, saying, 'This would look great on you!' and she's never been wrong… I honestly don't get how she does it."

What unsettled him most was that every piece Shihoko sent not only fit perfectly but also suited him ridiculously well. Maybe it was a perk of her job, but she always picked clothes that hugged his figure just right, which, as her son, was more than a little unnerving.

Usually, clothes chosen by one's parents tended to be either embarrassing or completely off in taste. But since his mother was a professional with a sharp eye for fashion, her choices were on point, and so Amane accepted them with gratitude.

"Say, maybe Shihoko-san's actually more like Kido than Chi?" Itsuki mused.

"Hmm…she's more like if they combined without diluting either one."

"That's one hell of a combo."

"No kidding… You can say that again."

Looking back, Amane couldn't tell whether he should thank or blame his mother's personality for the fact that he hadn't rejected Chitose outright when Itsuki had first introduced them. Given the state he'd been in back then, the only reason he'd managed to accept her as a friend was because Shihoko had already toughened him up to hyper-energetic individuals. In a way, he supposed he owed her for that.

"Well, let's just call her a magnificent mother and leave it at that. But anyway, what do I do about this…?"

"About what?"

"I dunno. It's just…annoying."

"Excuse me?"

"You've had the height, and now you've also got yourself some good muscle, so everything ends up looking good on you. Lucky bastard."

"Is it just me, or have you been giving me nothing but abuse lately?"

Itsuki's comment irritated Amane a little, especially since he had been the one who offered to coordinate the outfit in the first place.

"Height's something I'll never have, you know," Itsuki grumbled.

"You're not even short…"

Amane was indeed taller, but Itsuki was by no means a short guy. In

fact, he was taller than average.

"I just want, like, three more centimeters!"

"Good luck making that happen."

"Damn it all…"

It seemed unlikely he'd grow anymore, so gaining another three centimeters was a tall order, if it was even possible at all.

From Amane's perspective, it wasn't all that great being much taller anyway, but he wisely kept that opinion to himself. Saying it out loud would only start a war. So, instead, he kept his mouth shut and watched Itsuki sift through his clothes in search of the right outfit.

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In a battle of fashion sense, Itsuki would always come out on top. Amane, who had no trust in his own taste, decided to leave everything in his friend's hands and play the role of a mannequin. After about ten minutes of being dressed and adjusted, he finally earned Itsuki's seal of approval and changed into the chosen outfit. Not that his wardrobe offered many options to begin with. The process was more about making the best of what he had.

This will do it. I'm all dressed, so all that's left to do now is my hair… Amane thought. But as soon as he stepped foot out of his room, he was immediately ambushed by Itsuki and Chitose, who had been lying in wait for him.

"Chi, you're up."

"Yup, on it!"

"…Wait, up to do what? You're just gonna style my hair, right?"

"Um, no? Makeup, too."

"So that explains the huge bag…"

He'd wondered earlier why Chitose's bag had looked unusually bulky when she came in. He'd assumed it was full of hair products, but it was apparently all makeup.

Amane didn't have anything against the idea, but since he almost never wore any himself, it did bring him more confusion than comfort. When his

eyes met Chitose's, she flashed him a mischievous wink.

"I figured we might as well take the chance to go all in. Even a little makeup can make a huge difference, you know? Allow me to offer a look that brings out the best of your natural charm," Chitose said with a flourish.

"I mean, I'm not against it…but will it really change that much?"

"You're underestimating makeup's power, mister. I definitely think you'd look great with a bit of makeup. Actually, I know you would, 'cause we've done this once before."

"That was you two messing around without asking, remember?"

Amane unearthed the faint memory of Chitose's antics that he hardly wanted to remember and mentally tossed it into the trash with the flick of a finger.

Chitose smiled without remorse. "You have to admit, you looked adorable," Chitose teased.

"I'd love nothing more than to erase that from everyone's memory."

"Hey, stop trying to grab my face! I'm innocent here!" Itsuki protested.

Amane reached out fiercely with the full intention to wipe the memory from Itsuki's mind as well, and Itsuki exercised his right to self-defense by catching his arm and pulling him down onto the sofa. This was partly to avoid the incoming iron claw, but it mostly seemed to be to prevent Amane from escaping.

Not that Amane had any intention of doing so in the first place. He'd already decided to let his friends handle everything today, but apparently Itsuki wasn't taking any chances.

Chitose grinned like she was having the time of her life and pulled a set of tools out of her bag. Amane sighed, relaxed his body, and resigned himself to his fate.

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"Huh…all traces of introvert energy are gone," Itsuki remarked once both his hair and makeup were complete.

"…Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

“It is, it is,” he said quickly, though his grin didn’t inspire much confidence.

Amane frowned, unconvinced by the dubious praise, while both Itsuki and Chitose smirked at him.

“You look so cool, it’s like—who even *are* you? A brand-new bright and breezy Amane has been born.”

“Pfft, this is gold.”

“See? You guys think this is funny.”

“Of course, that’s ’cause we know what you’re normally like. All you need now is that special smile you save for Shiina-san, and you’d be perfect.”

“You two are never seeing that.”

That smile wasn’t something he could just turn on, and even if he somehow did, they would tease him like there was no tomorrow. There was no way he was giving them that satisfaction.

Still, they both showed an intentionally dramatic, “My, oh my,” expression before grinning in unison. Their smug faces were so obnoxious that Amane heaved a sigh like no other.

“All right, enough of that. In any case, thanks for the help. I’ve got no idea if Mahiru will actually like it, but…a little change of pace now and then can’t hurt.”

“I’m sure she’ll love it,” Chitose said confidently.

“At the very least, it will make her happy knowing her boyfriend dressed up just for her,” Itsuki added. “And if it happens to match her tastes on top of that, that’s just bonus points.”

“Let’s hope it lines up with them,” Amane muttered.

Just as Itsuki had said, Mahiru would no doubt be happy to see that Amane had made the effort to dress up for her. Of course, what he was really after were the bonus points that would come afterward. He wanted to see her even more delighted, if he had the power to.

He didn’t know Mahiru’s exact preferences when it came to looks, but thanks to his friends’ help, he figured he at least looked pretty presentable. All that was left was to see whether it matched her tastes.

Careful not to mess up his lovely hair, Amane lightly pinched his bangs

to fiddle with how they fell. Chitose, clearly pleased with her handiwork, gave him a slap on the shoulder. “Less worrying, more doing! Come on, get going already!”

Amane rose to his feet with a chuckle, appreciating the encouragement.

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After parting ways with his two friends who were kind enough to lug heavy bags over on their day off just to help him, Amane headed for the meeting spot.

By the way, Itsuki and Chitose were planning to drop their things off at home before heading out on a date of their own. Amane felt bad for cutting into their plans, but more than anything, he was grateful for their help. He’d already decided he’d treat them to something next time to make it up to them.

There was still plenty of time before he was supposed to meet Mahiru. Even though there was no reason to rush, he ended up walking faster and faster as he grew more excited to show her his new look.

He made sure to keep his hairstyle intact. Every so often, he’d stop to check his reflection in a shop window, using it as a makeshift mirror before continuing on again. The frequent pauses slowed his pace.

Once aware of how uncharacteristically restless he felt, Amane found himself chuckling—and then when he realized he didn’t mind being like this, he laughed once more. Wanting to look good for the person you love was such a simple, obvious thing, yet it still had his heart fluttering. And he didn’t mind it one bit.

It’s amazing how much I’ve changed, Amane thought, smiling wryly as he remembered the past version of himself who used to hate dealing with people.

When he arrived at the meeting spot, Mahiru was already there, her back turned toward him. Her salon appointment must have finished earlier than expected. There was no mistaking her delicate frame or the soft, flaxen hair that shimmered even more brightly than usual.

He came to a brief stop and glanced down at his watch.

As he expected, he was still a good thirty minutes early. Amane felt guilty that Mahiru had come so far ahead of time, and he struggled to think of a way he should greet her.

If possible, he wanted to give her a little surprise. She wouldn't expect him to be here yet, so he thought of pulling a slight prank on her.

Though knowing her, she might see right through it, he thought with a faint smile.

Careful not to make a sound, Amane approached her from behind. The breeze caught her flaxen hair, making it sway softly before his eyes. Watching it dance in the light, he leaned in slightly and opened his mouth to speak.

"Pardon me, lovely lady. Care to join me for a cup of tea? You appear to have some time to spare." Amane called out to the dainty figure before him. He adopted a tone that was lighter and sweeter than his usual.

Mahiru turned around. Her face bore the kind of polite, practiced smile she reserved for strangers that flawlessly hid her irritation at being imposed upon. But before the words of refusal could form on her soft pink lips, she froze.

Her gaze was locked on Amane's face.

"Something tells me you've got about thirty minutes to spare," he said this time in his usual tone, gentle and calm. "If you would oblige, may I have a bit of that time?"

Mahiru stood frozen, mouth slightly agape, as she looked at him, unable to believe her eyes. No, forget looking, she was outright staring. Her reaction told Amane she found his transformation to be quite drastic.

This brought a smile to his face. "I got some help from Itsuki and Chitose today to dress up a little. Pretty different from usual, huh?"

Under the combined supervision of his style-conscious friends, Amane's look had been completely transformed. His hair that he typically left to fall straight forward was now parted at the center to reveal his forehead, styled loosely with a bit of volume for a soft, rounded shape. It gave off an airy vibe and charm without feeling frivolous.

And thanks to his face no longer being hidden by his bangs, Chitose's

makeup handiwork was on full display. That said, Chitose hadn't gone overboard with the makeup. She'd chanted a list of mysterious incantations about concealing pores, highlights, and shading while working on his face. Her assistance provided him with an even more stunning look and a better-defined, smaller face.

As for his outfit, that was Itsuki's domain. He wore a high-quality wool long coat over a turtleneck, paired with wide-legged pants that were loose enough for ease but not sloppy. All put together, the ensemble gave him a relaxed impression. The monochrome palette was broken up with a touch of color from his pants and scarf, adding just enough brightness to keep the look from feeling too dark.

According to Itsuki, items with a casual feel like blousons and down jackets were the current trend, but with Amane's height and build, it would be a waste not to take advantage of it. "You actually look more stylish in a long coat," he'd said, so Amane had let him take complete control this time.

The end result was a clean outfit that struck a perfect balance between casual and refined. Just judging by clothes alone, he figured he wouldn't look out of place standing next to Mahiru.

Personally, he thought it suited him reasonably well, though whether it matched Mahiru's tastes was another matter entirely. Then again, given that she was still completely frozen in place, even now, it wasn't exactly possible to get an accurate reading on her preferences.

"…Does it look weird?"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!"

"Whoa—okay, that made me jump."

Growing increasingly anxious from her silence, Amane timidly asked Mahiru for her thoughts.

Mahiru, finally coming back to her senses, quickly shook her head with such vigor that it caught Amane completely off guard.

"It looks *amaaaazing*! Who came up with this idea? Was it Chitose-san? It was, wasn't it? It has to be! She tried to research my preferences the other day!"

"Hey, not so loud. It was my idea to dress up, actually. I just…wanted to try wearing a style you'd love. I wanted to see you smile… Should I not

have?"

He glanced at her, observing her reaction.

Mahiru let out an adorable "Uuuu…" sound before murmuring, "This is so unfair…" under her breath. "Why didn't you tell me ahead of time? If you had, I would've dressed up more stylishly too!"

"I think you look plenty stylish already."

"That's not the point! I would've tried harder! Worn something cuter! …I even had something new that would've been perfect…!"

"I think what you're wearing now is super cute, though. You're always pretty."

Today, she'd picked out an ensemble that was easy to move around in for the salon—but pretty was pretty, no matter what she wore. Honestly, there wasn't a single day when Mahiru wasn't adorable, so Amane was right to say she was always pretty.

Still, today there was something a little different about her.

"Did you trim your bangs a bit? It suits you. Your hair looks smoother than usual too, and those soft curls are really pretty."

She only got a light trim to tidy things up, but Amane saw her every day, so no change ever made it past him. Amane remembered her saying she was thinking of cutting her bangs soon, and now that she had, the slightly shorter fringe made her seem brighter and fresher.

Her beautiful hair, which she took good care of daily, looked even silkier, and her cuticles gleamed perfectly. It had always been glossy and smooth, but the professional touch had taken it to another level entirely.

Specialist salons are truly a different beast, Amane realized with newfound respect.

When he voiced his honest impressions, Mahiru flusteredly began swatting at his arm with pink cheeks. But each time their eyes met, she froze, groaned, then looked away again. This cycle repeated several times.

If nothing else, Amane could tell he'd succeeded in making her happy.

"Sorry about that, I didn't think it would make you this happy."

"Of course I would be! I'm delighted!"

"Great… I'm glad. I think I finally understand how you feel when you dress up. It reminded me all over again of the effort that you always give. I

know you mainly do it for yourself, but even so, I hope you know it makes me happy too."

Amane never believed that Mahiru put so much care into her appearance just for him. He knew it was also a matter of pride and personal taste. Even so, knowing that at least part of that effort was to make him smile made Mahiru all the more precious to him. She cared enough to do that, and Amane was overjoyed by that thought.

Amane had never been particularly interested in fashion, although he had been giving it more of his attention as of late. But seeing Mahiru's delighted expression now made him want to put in more effort. It felt as though he'd rediscovered his driving force.

"As always, thank you." Amane offered his gratitude with a kind smile to the lovely girl who never ceased striving to look her best.

She clung to his arm, then began to tremble.

"Uuu…uuuhh…"

"You're an emotional mess today," Amane teased.

"And whose fault do you think that is?"

"Mine. Do I look good, though?"

"Yes, *incredibly* good… Uuuhh…"

"You're vibrating super hard today."

"Whose—?"

"Mine again. Well, mine, Chitose and Itsuki's?"

Getting to see Mahiru's delighted smile made Amane all the more grateful to his two friends who had helped him out. He owed them more than he could ever repay.

"…I'll have to thank them two later," Mahiru murmured.

"By all means. For all their teasing, they really do look out for us… Sure, half of it's probably just for their own amusement, but I still owe a lot to them."

Amane genuinely meant what he said. He owed quite a bit to their goodwill. Of course, he'd be happier if they could drop the mischief, but he knew that wasn't going to happen. But at the end of the day, Amane didn't actually mind. He honestly found it kind of fun, but that was something he'd never admit to them.

“Maybe I’ll thank Chitose-san by cooking her something extra spicy next time,” Mahiru mused.

“That would be more like a punishment to some,” Amane replied dryly.

“Hehe, for Chitose-san, it would be a welcome reward. As for Akazawa-san…hmm, what should we do for him…?”

As Mahiru wondered how to thank today’s star contributors, Amane offered his hand to begin their date a little ahead of schedule. This time, she didn’t shy away. With a gentle blush, she intertwined her fingers with his.

Does it suit me...?
STAB
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Surprise Visit to a Best Friend's Workplace

"So yeah! That's why I think now's about time we checked out where you work, Amane!"

"*So yeah*, my foot. You never even said anything."

The four of them had decided to have lunch together as usual, but out of nowhere, Chitose had a sudden burst of energy and made that bizarre declaration. Amane stared at her, unamused.

With a loud *thump*, she struck the table as if to drive her point home—but all it accomplished was making their lunchboxes tremble, which was, frankly, rather annoying.

"What's so fun about coming to my workplace anyway…?" Amane asked her.

"Oh, you know. I still wanna see you in your cool, customer-service café mode."

"I don't recall ever installing such a silly 'mode' in myself."

"What are you saying?" Itsuki inquired. "You flawlessly played a distinguished gentleman at the culture festival, remember?"

"As if I could handle customers while acting like a gloomy recluse. And you were in playboy flirt 'mode' yourself, weren't you?"

"Hey now, that's one harsh opinion of me you've got there. Right, Shiina-san?"

"Amane-kun, that was a bit much."

"Urk."

Mahiru's gentle scolding made him pause for a moment, wondering if he'd gone too far. But Itsuki had actually acted like a flirt back then, so he didn't think the comment was unwarranted.

Itsuki was the kind of guy who naturally leaned into that easygoing energy. It might have been part of his nature, though it was just as fair to say he deliberately chose to play up that persona.

"No matter how much Akazawa-san likes teasing you, it's still not good to exaggerate things," Mahiru chided. "He's just humorous and free-spirited, that's all."

"So even Mahirun thinks you're a free spirit, eh?" Chitose noted.

"I'd also say he is adept at thinking on his feet."

"Is that a compliment?" Itsuki asked, baffled.

"Yes, it's very much one."

Amane turned away to hide his laughter when he saw Itsuki so clearly thrown off by Mahiru's straightforward praise. But Itsuki, sharp as anything, caught on immediately.

"You're laughin', aren't you?" he said, his voice an octave or two lower than usual.

"Chill, chill," Chitose said to Itsuki. "Anyway, Mahirun already got to visit the other day, right? We were considerate enough not to go before your girlfriend did, but now that the grand reveal is done and dusted, it's fair game!"

Amane had invited Mahiru to the café where he worked for White Day, and both Chitose and Itsuki knew about it. He hadn't intended to keep it secret. Nevertheless, he never expected them to think, *"Mahirun's had her fun already, so it's our turn now!"*

"Fair game, my foot," Amane said flatly. "Don't come."

"That's horrible! Is that how you talk to a customer?!"

"Don't call yourself a customer when you ain't one."

"You're supposed to attract customers, not scare them away!" Chitose exclaimed, raising her voice.

"Hey, you came to where *I* work, didn't you?" Itsuki remarked.

"Guh…"

His two friends made some solid points, but Amane still struggled to yield.

Fumika, the owner, would be thrilled to have more customers through the door—and if she got to witness a sweet couple like Amane and Mahiru

in action, she would have no reason to object.

Itsuki's reasoning wasn't wrong either. Amane had already seen Itsuki at work, and considering he'd even ordered a bouquet from him one time, turning him away would seem downright heartless.

Still, he hesitated to invite them over when they were in such an excitable mood.

"What do you even wanna come for…?"

"Well, you know…"

"Oh, you know…"

"Your smug little grins are seriously making me annoyed."

They wore identical smirks that made it look like they were up to no good. At times like these, Amane was reminded of how alike his two lovebird friends really were.

"I just wanna come and see your customer-service smile in action."

"Well, don't."

"Aw, don't be such a grump! Just let us seeeee!"

"You're definitely just doing this for your own amusement."

"Well, if I'm being honest, I actually wanna see Mahirun's face as she watches you. She always looks so happy."

"I-I'm the reason you want to go…?" Mahiru asked, shocked.

"Hey, quit trying to rope Mahiru onto your side."

Chitose knew perfectly well that if Mahiru ever asked for something, Amane would cave in instantly, so of course, she was trying to nudge Mahiru into doing just that. It was a clever maneuver, but not one Amane especially appreciated.

Even now, Mahiru had still not visited the café a second time despite Amane already granting her permission. But if Chitose encouraged her to come along with everyone as a group, Mahiru would probably agree in a heartbeat.

Amane glanced at Mahiru—and steeled himself.

"Um… Are you sure…we can't go?" she asked softly, gazing up at him with puppy dog eyes.

There was no possible way Amane could refuse now.

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In the end, Amane gave in to peer pressure. He let out a long sigh as soon as he clocked in for his shift. It happened to be a quiet time of day, so he'd let his guard down as there weren't any customers around, but he still never expected his friends to follow through on their plan so quickly. He would've liked at least a little time to brace himself.

"Welcome," Amane greeted kindly. "…A table for five, I see."

Two more than he'd expected.

"I went ahead and invited Yuu-chan and Ayaka-chan, too," Chitose said, beaming with delight.

Amane had been prepared for the amused-as-anything Chitose and Itsuki, and for Mahiru, who stood there with a shy but gleeful smile. But behind them stood two figures who hadn't been part of the conversation at lunchtime: Yuuta and Ayaka.

Ayaka had already seen him at work before, so her being here was one thing, but Amane hadn't expected them to bring Yuuta along. Feeling his face stiffen, Amane realized he was tenser now than he'd been during that entire lunchtime debate.

"Sorry about this, Fujimiya," Yuuta said, lowering his head.

"Nah, it's not like this is your fault…"

It wasn't like Amane didn't welcome them here.

His only concern was how showing this composed, professional version of himself in front of Yuuta somehow felt embarrassingly awkward. It may have been because their friendship was different from the one he shared with Itsuki, but that subtle difference was now coming through.

"We were coming anyway, so I figured more would be merrier."

"How very considerate of you," Amane replied dryly.

"At least pretend to mean what you're saying."

"Allow me to show you to your seats."

"Wow, ignored, huh?"

"Itsuki, don't bother him while he's working," Yuuta interjected.

Yuuta was the voice of reason in such moments, and he currently served

as the group's most reliable moral compass. Under normal circumstances, Mahiru would fill the role as the other voice of reason, but she had clearly abandoned that post for today. That left Yuuta as the group's sole hope of keeping things under control. Ayaka might step in if things got really out of hand, but she preferred to sit back and watch the chaos unfold. Judging by how she was smiling and nodding along with Mahiru's delighted expression, Amane doubted she'd intervene at all.

Feeling a small pit in his stomach, he called out, "Table for five," and led them to a booth. For Itsuki, Chitose, and Yuuta, it was their first time inside. On the way over, they each made their own comments: "The atmosphere is nice," "I'm gettin' hyped already," and "Don't fool around too much or we'll get scolded." The booth was spacious enough for five people to sit comfortably. Once they'd settled in, boys on one side, girls on the other, Amane smiled politely, then placed the menus gently on the table before them.

"Here are your menus. When you're ready to order, please ring the bell on the table and someone will come to assist you." Amane delivered the standard line in as calm a tone as possible. Then he headed off to fetch water and hand towels. But since it was a slow hour and there weren't any other customers around, his coworker on shift today, Miyamoto, had evidently been watching them. He fluidly slid over toward Amane.

"Isn't she your girlfriend?" he asked quietly.

"Sure is," Amane nodded.

Miyamoto had seen Mahiru before on White Day, so it was no surprise that he recognized her. Still, Amane was impressed by how quickly he noticed her. He must have had a sharp memory.

"Who are the rest?"

"They're my friends."

"So, today's special is *The Cheerful Gang Visits the Café?*"

"…Yes, something to that effect."

"You look *so* thrilled."

"Wouldn't you feel awkward if your friends watched you act all professional at work?"

Amane wasn't that against it, but he was a little self-conscious. The

embarrassment was enough to make him uneasy, and he was afraid he might end up looking awkward in front of them without meaning to.

"Yeah, I know that feeling. But make sure you still treat them well, all right?"

"I'll treat them as any staff member would."

"You aren't mad, are you?"

"No, not really. I simply think they were wrong to suddenly up the headcount and then come in here itching to mess with me."

If one asked whether he was angry, he would have said no. He wasn't so petty as to get mad over something like this, and, truth be told, he was glad that people cared enough to make the effort.

That said, he still felt a little put off by their hospitality-ruining move of bringing unplanned guests, so he resolved to give Itsuki an elbow jab or two tomorrow.

You'll pay for this. Amane glanced over toward Itsuki, who was happily chatting with the others a short distance away, and heard Miyamoto's slightly exasperated tone beside him.

"Do they target you?"

"Sort of. But I give as good as I get," he replied.

He wouldn't say that he was a target. The messing went both ways, and neither side was always on the receiving end. That kind of balance was what made them equals, and if they were anything but, it would mean they weren't truly his friends.

"Hm. If you say so, I guess I have nothing to worry about… Ah, but let me give you one piece of advice."

"What is it?"

"You might wanna tone down the look you give your girlfriend."

"Duly noted. Thanks for the warning."

For even Miyamoto to say that, Amane must have really lost control of his expressions during Mahiru's last visit. He'd probably been smiling so softly at her that his facial muscles had given up all pretense of professionalism.

If Itsuki and Chitose were to see that face, they'd surely never let him live it down. He could already imagine Itsuki messing with him, like, *"You*

make that face all the time already," but Amane quickly shut his imaginary friend up. With a solemn nod, he turned back to Miyamoto, taking the advice to heart.

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Amane made his way back to the table, carrying a tray stacked with glasses of water and hand towels. The menus were neatly placed in the center of the table, so everyone must have been ready to place their order.

"Here are your waters and hand towels."

Mahiru lifted her head. "Thank you very much. Excuse me, waiter, may we order now?"

"Of course." Amane set everything down in front of them and straightened his posture, ready to take their orders.

"Look at you go, actually doing the whole waiter thing," Chitose joked, throwing him a comment that barely counted as teasing.

Amane didn't let it affect his expression and simply looked at everyone in the group to see who would order first. Then, Itsuki raised his hand. With an infuriatingly smug grin, he spoke in an unnecessarily polite tone of voice.

"Me first, waiter! One of your brightest smiles, please!"

"I'm terribly sorry, sir, but we don't offer that item in this establishment."

He had to wonder if Itsuki had mistaken the place for some kind of fast-food joint.

If Amane weren't currently on the clock, he'd have snapped back with a nice and short, *"Are you a moron?"* but right now, he was a café employee, not a friend. So he swallowed the urge and instead met the request with a perfectly professional smile. It was surely not the one that Itsuki had asked for.

"Oh, so you only stock the customer-service smiles here."

"Yeah, though his mouth's twitching like crazy. I'll take one smile too, please!"

"I'm terribly sorry, miss, but we don't offer that item in this

establishment."

"Wow, this waiter's no fun."

"I am on shift. Now then, have you decided on your order?"

Amane shot them a look that warned, *"Keep messing around, and I won't take your orders,"* then turned to Yuuta, the one person he could count on today.

Yuuta met his gaze with a kind, understanding smile.

"We'll have four of the seasonal cake sets. For the drinks, two hot original blends, two hot café au laits, and then one espresso on its own, please."

Yuuta had gathered everyone's choices and neatly ordered for the whole group without wasting a word. As a waiter, Amane couldn't have asked for anything more efficient. Grateful for his consideration, he quickly jotted the order down on his notepad.

"Huh? Yuu-chan, you're not getting a cake set?"

Amane already noticed they were one cake set short. Since no one here disliked sweets, he speculated that Yuuta passed on it either to save money or simply because he wasn't in the mood.

But when Amane looked over, Yuuta looked just a little bit embarrassed.

"…I've been eating sweets every day as of late, so I told myself I'd hold off when eating out."

"Ahh…"

Amane immediately thought back to the mountains of chocolates Yuuta had received on Valentine's Day. It looked like a challenge and a half simply to bring them all home, and if he was trying to eat every single one before they expired, he had to be having multiple per day.

Amane later learned that Yuuta usually declined handmade gifts because of a minor incident in the past, so most of what he'd received were store-bought. That meant each one had its own expiration date, which did allow him to pace himself, but even so, it must've been an incredible amount to get through.

Strangely enough, despite eating all those sweets, Yuuta put on no weight at all. That was just the kind of baffling guy he was.

Chitose was just as stumped. "So how on earth do you not gain weight

from that then? And no acne, either. It doesn't add up."

"Not even Sou-chan could burn off that many calories if he ate sweet stuff every day. I don't know whether to be impressed or concerned," Ayaka added.

"Even for me, maintaining such a large intake every day would begin to affect my weight…"

"He has the self-discipline of a monster."

Poor Yuuta was being ganged up on from all sides, and he only replied with a calm, "I burn it all off through club practice, workouts, and studying."

No tricks, no secrets—only pure effort. It would not be dramatic at all to call the guy dedication incarnate.

"Will that be all for your order?"

"Yep, that's everything, thank you."

"Allow me to retrieve your menus."

Still impressed by Yuuta's remarkable self-discipline, Amane waited until the conversation had naturally shifted to Yuuta's incredible work ethic before gathering the menus and slipping away to the kitchen to relay their orders.

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Unlike the pancakes, which were made to order, the cakes were prepared in advance, so they were ready to serve fairly quickly. Even factoring in the drinks, Amane brought everything out without keeping them waiting long.

Today's cake was a fraisier topped with seasonal fruit. It was a French classic that supposedly filled the same niche as a shortcake in Japan. Its elegant appearance was pretty enough on its own, but the flavor was just as delightful. Though the buttercream base might have sounded heavy, the tartness of the strawberries balanced it perfectly, making it surprisingly easy to finish.

Amane had taste-tested it earlier, and it was so scrumptious that he seriously considered taking one home. He wanted his friends to enjoy it too while they were here.

“It looks soooo good!”

Japanese fraisier cakes usually had a glossy red glaze on top, and this one was no exception. The vibrant red layer gave the surface a splendid shine. The cross-section revealed neatly arranged strawberries set against the pale buttercream, creating a vivid contrast that made the whole dessert striking despite its simple design.

“Thank you very much. It really does look delicious.”

“This is one of our most popular desserts. It’s a seasonal item, so I hope you will enjoy it while it’s available.”

Even though the café only served it during strawberry season, it had earned rave reviews from regulars. Many had begged Fumika to make it a permanent menu item, but she insisted that it was only so delicious while strawberries were in season, so that wish was unlikely to come true.

After setting their cakes and drinks on the table, Amane offered his customary polite line, “Please enjoy your time here,” before turning to leave. But just as he did, something tugged at his apron. Glancing back, he found Chitose’s slender fingers gripping the fabric, her seat on the aisle side giving her the perfect angle to block his escape.

“Ma’am—”

“It’s all right, we’re the only customers in.”

“No, it’s not all—”

“It’s fine!” Miyamoto called from the back. “No one else is here at the moment, so you can chill for a bit. I’ll be in the back doing prep work. If someone comes in, just stop and help them out, okay?”

Amane couldn’t believe his ears. Before he could tell Chitose that it wasn’t all right at all, Miyamoto cheerfully gave him the go-ahead from the kitchen.

A triumphant smirk formed on Chitose’s face.

Since it was a weekday during the off-peak hours between lunch and dinner, they were indeed the only five customers in the café. When things got this quiet, the staff usually chatted while doing small tasks. Still, no matter how empty the place was, should Miyamoto really have been giving the green light for a server to casually chat with customers like this?

…Well, I get the feeling the owner would allow it too, if she heard.

In fact, he could imagine Fumika would come out to happily chat away until Amane felt like he was trespassing on enemy turf. She was supposed to be in the back handling paperwork today, so it was unlikely she heard anything.

I bet she'd stick her head out the moment she notices Mahiru and her friends are here, Amane thought, smiling awkwardly as he pictured a gleeful smile on her face.

Is he really sure about this? Amane glanced at Miyamoto, to which his coworker returned a light grin and a big thumbs-up. Amane could tell he was being toyed with, but he accepted the kindness for what it was, let out a resigned sigh, and turned back toward the group, who were merrily digging into their cakes.

Mahiru looked a little apologetic, though her joy at having him nearby was unmistakable. The sunny smile she showed him was so sweet that anyone outside their circle would have surely taken it the wrong way.

"Your thoughts are written all over your face, Mahirun."

"Eh—?"

Apparently not realizing what expression she was making, Mahiru pressed a hand to her cheek, flustered and lost for words. Amane had to worry that she might be acting a little bit too carelessly. Yet no sooner had that thought passed through his mind than he heard someone murmur, "Don't be a hypocrite, Fujimiya-kun."

Uh, I never said that out loud, did I?

He turned to find Ayaka watching him with an amused little smile.

"It's written all over your face too, Mister," she said innocuously.

I didn't think I had let it show… Amane thought to himself, but clearly she had proven him wrong.

"Do you come here often, Mahirun?"

"Not a lot of time has passed since my first visit, and I wouldn't want to cause problems for Amane-kun, so I think coming by only every once in a while is enough."

"I doubt that would cause any problems, though." Amane had kept her waiting for so long, so he felt she should come whenever she wanted. But if *whenever she wanted* happened to be every day, it would be a significant hit to both their finances and his heart.

"Mahirun is always so considerate about that stuff," Chitose remarked. "Though to be honest, if she started coming too often, Amane's sweet-as-sugar smiles might end up being her problem."

"Yeah, and then Shiina-san might get all worried that he'll accidentally snatch some other girl's heart," one of them added.

"How, when I don't even smile like that at anyone but Mahiru?" Amane returned.

"Oh, you know, collateral damage."

"You say that like I'm super popular." Amane felt like everyone had been giving him way too much credit than he deserved lately.

A regular had once tried to set him up with their granddaughter, and a girl had even confessed to him once, so Amane supposed he wasn't entirely unpopular. Still, calling himself "popular" felt absurd. That kind of label was for people like Yuuta, who drew girls in without even trying. In Amane's case, people simply thought he was decent enough—nothing more. They'd joked about it before, but if he ever started to seriously believe he was

popular, it would go straight to his head. So, as always, he couldn't bring himself to agree.

"Whether you are or not has nothing to do with Mahirun worrying about it. Acting ignorant is part of the problem," Chitose warned.

"I'll be more careful." Amane took her words to heart.

"No, I should just not get jealous in the first place," Mahiru murmured.

"There's nothing wrong with getting a little bit jealous, Mahiru, but I don't ever want to make you feel insecure. So I'll still be careful."

Amane had already made her worry a few times before—never on purpose, but he didn't want to let that happen again. The last thing he wanted was to hurt Mahiru without realizing it. As much as possible, he wanted her to feel comfortable, happy, and secure at his side, so he promised himself to be more mindful of her feelings.

When he turned back to her with that resolve in mind, Mahiru blinked once, then quickly looked down, her cheeks tinged pink.

"Case in point—you're letting your Mahirun smile show *again*." Chitose pointed out, exasperated.

"You just don't learn, do you?" Itsuki ribbed.

"What? This is just my normal face."

"On what planet? Look in a mirror, man."

There was no mirror nearby, so Amane ignored the jab and adopted his anti-Itsuki expression.

"All right, that stings," Itsuki muttered, sounding sulky.

Amane ignored that as well.

"Still, you're really taking this job seriously, huh?" Itsuki muttered.

"Why wouldn't I? It's work."

"When I first heard you were working at a café, I thought, 'Oh dear, will this boy be all right…'?"

"I don't need your concern. And besides, didn't you sulk pretty hard about it when I first got the job?"

"Did you really have to bring that up?!"

Itsuki had once been a little miffed by how Amane hadn't asked him for help before starting the job. Remembering that, Itsuki jerked upward and almost leaped out of his seat.

Of course, Yuuta immediately reached out while saying, “Itsuki, stay,” to hold him back.

“Oh yeah, I remember that! Ikkun actually sulked for once.”

“Don’t join in, Chi!”

“He who seeks revenge digs two graves, Itsuki.”

“…Yuuta, why are you way nicer to Amane than you are to me?”

“Well, because you are the instigator most of the time.”

“You’re horrible!”

These two sure are good friends, Amane thought. Itsuki and Yuuta were comfortable enough with each other to trade jabs such as that, and Yuuta even handled him a little bit rougher than he would other people, which was not something you saw every day from one as composed as him.

Still, it wasn’t undeserved. Itsuki tended to fool around more than he should, so the colder attitude Yuuta took toward him was just the natural consequence of his own behavior. Amane couldn’t exactly muster much sympathy.

“I’ll have you know I’m doing just fine at work…for the most part.”

“Wow, that didn’t sound confident at all.”

“Wouldn’t it be weird if I started bragging like, ‘Mm, yes*, look at me! I’m a top-class employee!*’?”

“Yeah, that’d be totally out of character. Being a wimp… I mean, being humble is kinda your thing.”

“Oi.”

“Now, now,” Ayaka cut in lightly. “Managing to stay humble like that is one of Fujimiya-kun’s strengths. You don’t need to mind people who only mess with you all the time.”

“What was that side eye for, Kido?” Itsuki asked inquisitively.

“Oh, who knows?”

Ayaka’s sweet, radiant smile bounced Itsuki’s glare right back at him without even a hint of malice. That was just the kind of person she was.

Ayaka was a different kind of mood-maker from Chitose. She stood out as a natural balancer whose kindness, slightly scattered brain, and cunning drew her to be in the center of the class.

Itsuki grumbled, “Hasn’t everyone been a little bit too mean to me

lately?" and then his girlfriend said, "You kinda bring it on yourself, Ikkun. You poke people's sore spots without even realizing it sometimes," taking his friends' side.

Itsuki dramatically covered his eyes with his hands and made an obviously fake sniff as not even a single tear fell from his face. Amane was just about to sigh at his antics when he heard a listless voice from behind.

"Ah—"

He recognized it instantly. He turned around to find Oohashi standing there. He knew from the shift schedule that she was supposed to start an hour after he did, so he was surprised that so much time had already passed.

Amane was about to greet her—but then noticed she was staring intently at the booth. Amane followed her eyes and found Mahiru sitting quietly, taking sips of her café au lait.

Ahh, I know what this is.

Back on White Day, when Mahiru had first visited the café, Oohashi had accidentally spilled coffee on her skirt. The poor woman had been completely crushed by it afterward. Amane had received countless apologies from Oohashi, and it had gotten to her so severely that Mahiru had ended up worrying about her instead. Everyone had been incredibly busy since then, and so Oohashi hadn't yet had the chance to speak with Mahiru again.

It was obvious that she would freeze up now after seeing Mahiru visit again. She had apologized to her, but the guilt in her mind remained.

"I truly am so sorry for what I did back then…" Oohashi apologized once again.

"Oh, please don't worry about it," returned Mahiru. "You already apologized the other day, and if you dwell on it this much, I will feel guilty too."

"No, no, it was my carelessness…"

"That's not true. Really, you don't have to worry…"

"Uh, what's with the sudden apology showdown?"

"Ahem, Rino-san, you're making everyone nervous," Ayaka interjected gently.

The three who didn't know the story looked utterly lost, and Ayaka, one of the few who did, offered the dejected Oohashi a sympathetic look.

"But I caused you trouble too, Kido-chan."

"I don't mind. I got to witness a whole new genre of Shiina-san, after all."

"Genr…?"

"Anyway, keep apologizing, and you're just going to make Shiina-san uncomfortable. Miyamoto-saaan!"

"On it."

Ayaka could tell what she was saying wasn't going to make Oohashi feel any better, but it was too soon to give up just yet. She immediately called out to Miyamoto, who had been keeping an eye on things, anticipating exactly this. He arrived swiftly and gently led Oohashi away by the hand from where she was sitting.

"Fujimiya and his girlfriend both know how guilty you feel. They're having a fun time right now, so don't go making things all gloomy again," Miyamoto chided.

"Ugh…you're right. I'm sorry."

Oohashi grew even more despondent as she reflected on her behavior. Miyamoto heaved a dramatic sigh, then gently guided her by her hunched back toward the front of the café.

"Go on, get outside and sweep the front."

"Hate it when you boss me around, Daichi."

"I'm telling you to get some fresh air, you dunce."

Miyamoto was being considerate of Oohashi in his own way by giving her time to cool off her head, although he was going about it in a circuitous manner. With Mahiru sitting right there, she'd only spiral deeper into guilt if she stayed, so his call was the right one.

Oohashi went quiet and meekly took up his offer. Seeming a little bit guilty, Miyamoto gave her a soft pat on the back to guide her. Encouraged, she nodded faintly and slipped out of the café.

For a brief moment, Miyamoto looked down with sad eyes, but he promptly straightened up, donned his professional bright smile, and then pressed a hand lightly to his chest as he gave a courteous bow.

"My deepest apologies for the disturbance. Please continue to enjoy

your food and conversation."

Miyamoto bowed with elegant grace before heading back toward his station.

"His posture was spot on," Yuuta murmured. "I'm impressed."

"Yeah, and he switches gears fast. He was so casual with that waiter lady just a minute ago."

"Well, those two are sort of close," Amane replied. "The reason Miyamoto-san stayed professional with us is because he knows how to act depending on who he's talking to. Unlike *you*."

"You're really diggin' into me today, aren'tcha?"

"Remind me who decided to show up out of nowhere and brought extra people along?"

"That was Chi's idea, though!?"

"It's *your* fault for not stopping her."

"You tryna call me a kid!?" Chitose argued back.

"Fine, then let's say it's his fault for not supervising you properly."

"Kay, that's acceptable."

"You're fine with that, Chi…?"

Chitose accepted the logic, so all the blame ended up on Itsuki. His face crumpled in defeat, and Amane, who'd made him the scapegoat, chuckled.

He was ready to entertain whatever comeback Itsuki might throw at him, but then suddenly, the bell at the entrance chimed to signal a new customer. Amane's eyes darted toward the door, and in an instant, he took on his work expression.

"A customer just came in, so I'll be off."

"Sorry to hold you up, Fujimiya-kun," apologized Ayaka.

"Funny, I was hoping to hear that from the person who actually held me up. Anyway, see you later."

"Ugh, sorry, then!"

Amane laughed again at Chitose's petulant tone and started to step away from the table when a voice called out from behind him.

"Amane-kun, do your best at work, okay? You can do it."

It was nothing out of the ordinary—just an everyday remark. Mahiru encouraged him in her usual tone. But that alone was enough for Amane. He

felt his worn-down energy rapidly returning, and he straightened his face, suppressing the smile that threatened to appear, before heading briskly toward the entrance.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

“Excuse me, waiterrr! Could we get the check, please?”

It was about an hour later.

Amane had been going about his usual tasks of serving customers, clearing tables, washing dishes and siphons when Itsuki suddenly called out to him as he passed by the booth where Mahiru and his friends were sitting.

“Certainly. Please wait just a moment.”

He was in the middle of clearing a table from a group that had already left, his tray stacked with their used dishes. He’d have to drop them off at the wash station before he could handle their check.

Under normal circumstances, he would’ve asked Miyamoto or Oohashi to take care of the bill instead, but both of them were busy with other tasks at the moment. Realistically, it would be faster if he handled it himself—and judging by the way Itsuki and the others had been watching, they probably wanted to see him follow through to the very end, including handling their bill. As their waiter, he figured he should oblige.

They knew he was occupied too, for Itsuki gave him a knowing grin and said, “No rush, no rush.”

Amane had plenty he wanted to say in response, but he simply replied with, “Why, thank you,” and carried the tray toward the kitchen.

Just as he reached the back, he nearly bumped into Oohashi, who seemed to have finished her task right at that moment.

“Ah, Fujimiya-chan, Fujimiya-chan! Could you pass that check over to me?”

Her request came so suddenly that Amane couldn’t even process what she meant at first. Forgetting for a moment that she was his senior, he gave her a puzzled look.

“Pass it…to you?”

“I’ll cover their bill. Personally.”

“…Why?”

Her proposal caught Amane so off guard that his reply slipped out before he could stop himself, and his tone went from polite to frank.

Oohashi looked like she was expecting that reaction. She lowered her gaze slightly, looking a bit awkward as she began to explain.

“It’s not just for what happened last time—I kind of caused a scene today as well, so think of it as an apology for that? To be honest, if her skirt needed to be replaced, this bill wouldn’t even come close to covering it.”

“I don’t think Mahiru is concerned about that…”

Oohashi still hadn’t let go of her guilt, even though Mahiru was neither angry nor upset—in fact, she had hardly even thought about it since then. But Oohashi only shook her head slowly, unable to accept Amane’s reassurance.

“This is my way of making amends, of putting this behind me. If it’s unwelcome, I won’t force the matter.”

“…Let’s check with them.”

Amane could tell from the look on her face that this was necessary for her to move forward. Still, this wasn’t something he could agree to at his own discretion. It was better to ask the group directly.

By the time he returned to the front, all five of them had already finished tidying up their table and were waiting by the register. Luckily, no one stepped forward to pay for the whole group, meaning that they were planning to each cover their own orders. Amane glanced back to check that Oohashi was following a step behind and then made his way over to the group.

“We’re ready to pay! Is it okay if we all pay separately?”

“Uh… Your bill today will be on the house,” Amane explained hesitantly. This was the first time he had ever had to say something like that, and it made him strangely tense.

All five of them turned to stare at him in unison.

“Huh? What’re you paying our bill for?” Chitose returned.

“You shouldn’t do that, Fujimiya-kun!” Ayaka exclaimed.

“No, no—it’s not me paying it. Oohashi-san is.”

“What?”

Only then did they seem to notice Oohashi standing nearby, and everyone turned toward her.

With all five pairs of eyes on her, Oohashi brought her hands together in front of her face. Her expression was awkward yet free of any gloom.

“I’m sorry for interrupting your time today. I’d also like this to serve as an apology for the other day, so please let me cover the bill.”

“Ah, um, really, I don’t mind at all…”

“I know, Fujimiya-chan said the same thing. But…please, let me do this so I can make peace with it. I’m sorry to ask you to go along with my feelings, but you’re the one who I inconvenienced, so I’d like to even the scales a little… And again, I’m sorry to ask you to compromise.” Oohashi then added.

Mahiru turned to Amane.

But Amane had no words to offer her. This wasn’t his decision to make. Whether Mahiru accepted or not was entirely up to her, and her alone.

“…Then, I gratefully accept.”

“Thank you. I mean it.”

Mahiru accepted her offer, knowing how crushed Oohashi had been that day.

“I feel kinda bad since the rest of us weren’t even involved, though…” one of the boys admitted.

“Oh, it’s fine, it’s fine! In exchange, how about you come back sometime for more coffee or cake! Our light meals are great too!” Oohashi smoothly worked in a little sales pitch to turn them into repeat customers, so she must be feeling much better.

Every item on the café’s menu had been personally taste-tested and approved by Fumika herself, so everything they served was something they took pride in. Even without any sales pitch, they were all items that Amane hoped his friends would come back to enjoy again.

“…In that case, we gratefully accept your kindness.”

Curiously enough, Itsuki was quick to accept the offer. He usually politely declined such proposals.

What is he thinking…? Amane thought, but the moment he saw the sly grin Itsuki shot his way, he immediately understood.

"You thought it through and realized this gives you a perfect excuse to come back here again, didn't you?" he said.

"Oh please, that's quite the wild accusation."

"Aha ha, you two must be best buds," Oohashi laughed. "That's youth for ya."

Oohashi didn't seem to mind who among them decided to visit again, so there was nothing Amane could do other than make a bitter expression.

The other three had initially tried to decline as well, but after Oohashi's bright smile and cheerful pitch—"Our seasonal pancakes are super popular, you know!"—they seemed to decide they'd make up for it by spending money next time. In the end, they accepted her gesture without resistance.

At this rate, not just Itsuki but everyone else would wind up visiting the café too. Amane couldn't decide whether to be pleased about the potential sales boost or dread the idea of serving them again under pressure.

He quietly let out a slow, careful breath so none of them would notice. After each of his friends put their wallets away, he said half out of duty and half in resignation, "We look forward to your next visit."

In response, they all beamed at him, waving cheerfully as they said, "Thanks for the treat!"

Amane could only watch in silence as the group left the café in good spirits.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

"Looks like Rino bounced back?"

After closing, as Amane cleaned up according to his usual routine, Miyamoto called to him from the register as he counted the day's profit.

True to her word, Oohashi had paid for the group out of her own pocket, so as long as there were no accounting errors, the day's totals should still come out even. At the moment, the woman herself was off cleaning the break room, leaving just Amane and Miyamoto in the front.

“She does seem to be much better now,” Amane returned matter-of-factly.

As asked, Amane paused his cleaning and joined Miyamoto to double-count the register for discrepancies.

“Love to hear it.”

“You know if you’re that worried, you could just tell her so.”

“Give it a rest.”

Miyamoto’s inability to be honest with himself was nothing new, but considering he’d been more open than usual today, Amane chose not to pick on him any further.

I wonder what kind of face Oohashi-san would make if I told her that Miyamoto-san was just as worried about her, Amane mused. What he did know was that if he actually told her, then Miyamoto would strangle him on the spot. Reminding himself that curiosity kills the cat, he focused on counting the money in his hands.

Once the two of them confirmed there was no discrepancy, Miyamoto gave a light shrug and let his eyes wander toward the breakroom hallway, where Oohashi should still be cleaning.

“Well, that should ease most of her guilt. She’s sensitive about stuff like that,” Miyamoto muttered. “She just can’t help herself.”

He said that in an annoyed voice, but the expression on his face told a different story. It was gentle, soft, and easily the warmest one Amane had seen from him all day.

This guy just can’t be honest, can he? Amane thought with a chuckle. He imagined that if Miyamoto ever found out he was thinking, *Yup, that’s love for you*, he’d probably puff up and start scolding him on the spot.

Amane was about to resume his cleaning when Miyamoto suddenly spoke up, as if something had just come to mind.

“Sounds like they plan to come back again, by the way. You okay with that?”

Amane grimaced. He’d been trying very hard *not* to think about that.

“Wow, that’s one hell of a sour face,” Miyamoto remarked.

“It’s not ideal for me…but I can’t do anything to stop them.”

It was far from ideal, but it wasn’t as though he could scold them or tell

them what they could and couldn't do. All he could do was accept it and brace himself.

If they were just coming to enjoy a quiet meal without teasing him, Amane might not mind at all…but he knew his friends. Things would never stay that simple. Even Mahiru, as lovely as she was, would sit there beaming at him the entire time.

Yuuta and Ayaka were the moral compass of the bunch, but even Yuuta gave off the vibe that he might drop by out of pure-hearted support. Which meant that, at least until he got used to their presence, Amane would be eyeing the shift schedule in fear.

Amane released a long, weary sigh that he made no effort to hide. Then he heard Miyamoto say, "Man, you've got it tough too, huh." His voice carried sympathy, concern, and just a hint of teasing.

It went without saying that from that day on, Itsuki began using Amane's workplace as a refuge whenever he needed to get away from Daiki.

A Gift of Happiness Passed Along to Her

“My, oh my.”

Koyuki pressed a hand to her cheek, genuinely impressed. She’d expected Mahiru to just text her a picture, but to her surprise, an album of actual printed photos had arrived instead.

Koyuki hadn’t specified what form the picture should take—and had even mentioned that Mahiru needn’t trouble herself to send one—so she had half expected nothing to come at all. Yet, true to her word, Mahiru had kept her promise.

Koyuki wasn’t sure if the album’s design reflected Mahiru’s personal taste, but its simple cover was adorned with a few stickers and strips of washi tape. It was thick and pleasantly heavy in her hands, suggesting it held far more photos than she had expected. One might say it carried the weight of the everyday life Mahiru had built for herself.

Curious to see what kind of life she was leading now, Koyuki opened the album at once. A gentle smile rose to her lips almost instinctively.

On the very first page was a photo of Mahiru with a cheerful, innocent smile that Koyuki had never once seen back when she had been in her care.

Mahiru might have seen Koyuki as a parental figure, yet she had always been a reserved child in many ways. Part of that stemmed from her naturally quiet disposition, but much of it was shaped by the environment in which she had grown up. Back then, her smiles had only been modest or polite.

And yet now she could smile freely, without a worry to weigh her down.

Beside the photo, in bubbly handwriting that clearly wasn't Mahiru's, was a playful note that read: *"A candid shot of her sunny smile. She's all mushy because Amane's in front of her."*

Koyuki couldn't quite tell whether it was meant to be an explanation, commentary, or a teasing remark—but it did paint a vivid picture of when the photo was captured.

It seemed Mahiru had enlisted the help of her friends, as the next page showed her standing beside them, smiling a little shyly for the camera.

These girls—these were Mahiru's friends.

Knowing her, Koyuki was certain she only allowed people she truly trusted to stay close to her. What warmed her heart most was the simple fact that Mahiru had finally found people she could believe in. For someone who still remembered the lonely, guarded girl Mahiru had once been, that alone was enough to bring her comfort.

Mahiru-san has always been sensitive to people's malice.

Her upbringing had forced her to learn not to place her trust easily. And just as Koyuki had once feared, Mahiru's beauty and talent had attracted all kinds of people—those who spoke ill of her behind her back, and those who sought to use her for their own ends. Having faced more of such people than most, Mahiru had made the deliberate choice to keep her distance, presenting a "perfect" façade that left no room for anyone to draw closer.

And yet, there Mahiru was—wearing that beaming, unguarded smile. It could only mean one thing: she had finally found people she could trust with all her heart.

The album's pages were filled with colorful notes, each note penned in different handwriting and brimming with the writers' feelings. Among them, in Mahiru's neat, simple style, were the words: *"These are my friends."*

The instant Koyuki read that line, a relief like no other bloomed in her chest.

As she turned the pages, every photo she found captured Mahiru smiling. In some, she was pouting; in others, her cheeks were tinged pink with embarrassment—but in each one, her expressions were unmistakably genuine.

Whoever had taken those photos was no amateur. Mahiru's face glowed

with emotion in every shot, and her trust in the person behind the camera could be seen in the gentleness of her gaze.

Then, one photo in particular caught Koyuki's eye—a picture of Mahiru and Amane cooking together.

Neither of them was looking at the camera, yet the photo captured them cooking side by side in perfect harmony, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The sight reminded Koyuki once again that Mahiru had found the partner she had always dreamed of.

Just from that single image, Koyuki became certain that these two kids would never become dependent on each other in a way that diminished them. Instead, they would build a home filled with kindness and warmth, a place where love was freely given and returned in equal measure.

"I'm so glad she's found such wonderful friends—and a lovely boyfriend, too."

Even after stepping away from her position, Koyuki had never once stopped thinking about Mahiru.

By the time they'd parted ways, Mahiru already possessed the strength and the skills to stand on her own two feet. There was nothing left for Koyuki to teach her. And yet, she had still been a child—one without anyone she could trust completely. Even knowing that, Koyuki had no choice but to let her face the world alone.

Mahiru must have endured a loneliness far more crushing than Koyuki could ever begin to imagine. And yet—look at her now. Mahiru had found her smile. She had a boyfriend who truly understood and supported her, and friends who accepted her just as she was.

The radiant smile she wore now was one Koyuki herself had never been able to give her. To see Mahiru capable of such warmth brought her more joy than words could express.

And yet, that fact only made the actions of Mahiru's parents all the more unforgivable. The love they should have been the first to give her… Mahiru had finally, at long last, discovered it through others.

Those people…are truly…

How had they come to be that way?

Koyuki could neither comprehend nor ever hope to fathom the mindset

of parents who could neglect their own child. But she did, at least, understand the circumstances that had led them down that path. Though she would never condone it, and could never fully accept it, she could still see how it had happened.

"You could never hope to understand, could you? The feelings the four of us carry. Someone like you, born into a loving family, could never grasp how it feels to have your life torn apart."

"I don't expect you to understand. And if you choose to condemn us, then so be it. We won't change. It's far too late for that now."

"I don't care if I'm wrong. We ourselves were a mistake. Where we were born, what came after, everything."

"The three of us have committed grave mistakes. How could we ever hope to walk the right path now?"

Those voices dripping with venom and abhorrence still echoed in her mind. At the time, Koyuki hadn't been able to say another word. She'd known that anything she said would only sound empty to that woman.

She closed the album and exhaled slowly as though trying to keep those bitter memories from swallowing her whole.

When will it end, I wonder… Her… Their so-called revenge?

Koyuki had once asked Mahiru's mother, Sayo, why she had neglected her own daughter. After several rounds of careful questioning, the woman had finally answered, revealing what she, what he, what all of them were doing now.

Koyuki knew she had no right to judge the choices they had made. Even so, she couldn't help but question whether what they were pursuing was truly worth the price of abandoning their child. To her, it was inconceivable to leave behind a young, fragile girl for such a reason.

There had been a time when she'd considered exposing them publicly, but she knew that any attempt would be smothered long before it ever saw the light of day.

More than anything, though—

But…yes, perhaps they felt they had no other choice.

Perhaps, otherwise, they would fail to hold themselves together, shattering into a million pieces beneath the weight of their own anger,

hatred, resentment, and pain.

No, Koyuki thought. *They had already broken long ago.*

Now, they were merely trying to gather up those scattered fragments, to shape them into something resembling who they once were. Fueled by the unending fire of their hatred, they continued to walk down that searing crimson path.

With that thought, Koyuki found she could no longer bring herself to condemn them entirely. Instead, she was simply grateful that, before abandoning their daughter altogether, they had at least entrusted Mahiru to her care.

A faint, bitter sigh escaped her lips as her thoughts drifted back to the girl who had borne the weight of all their sins alone.

Vol. 11.5 Short Stories

Animate Purchase Bonus SS: A Little Excuse Every Now and Then
Bookwalker Purchase Bonus SS: This Might Have Been a Perfect Strike
Gamers Purchase Bonus SS: A Secret Bonus
Melon Books Purchase Bonus SS: A Man of His Word
Suruga-ya Purchase Bonus SS: Inside the Secret Bonuses
Toranoana Purchase Bonus SS: Stop Pretending Everything's Fine
Melon Books 2025 Summer Fair Purchase Bonus SS: XXXX

Short stories (SS) are bonus chapters about 2-5 pages long for the light novel.
They are distributed for a **limited time** by certain **Japanese bookstores** when a new volume is released or during certain **special events**.

As Yen Press does **not** officially translate these, they are available only in fan translation.

The **Vol. 5.5 Special Edition SS Booklet** compiles all short stories from **Vol. 1–5**.

The **Vol. 11.5 Special Edition SS Booklet** compiles all short stories from **Vol. 5.5–11**.

As of the time of this translation, the short stories from **Vol. 11.5** have **not** been compiled into a booklet.
For simplicity, we have added them here, at the end of the volume.

Animate SS

A Little Excuse Every Now and Then

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 115 from the Animate Bookstore in Japan

"…Amane-kun, I'm very upset with you right now."

It was a quiet weekend afternoon. Just after lunch, Mahiru suddenly declared that, and Amane instantly froze.

Her expression told him she wasn't furious, but the little pout on her face made it perfectly clear she was in a foul mood. With no idea what he'd done wrong, Amane felt a tight knot twist in his stomach as he frantically replayed every possible offense in his mind.

"Eh…? I—I'm terribly sorry…?"

"It's not a good thing to apologize without even asking what you did wrong. I can tell you're just trying to smooth things over to start."

"I'm sorry. I truly am—but I honestly have no idea what I've done. If it's not too much trouble, could you please tell me what exactly I did?"

Mahiru would never get upset without a good reason, and so Amane was certain he must've done something without realizing it. Bracing himself for embarrassment, he asked carefully.

Mahiru let out a quiet sigh. "The eggs."

"A-AHH!"

He'd done it. Completely and utterly.

That morning, telling himself he was starving, he'd gone all out and made himself a bacon and egg rice bowl using three eggs. That left only two eggs left in the carton.

"Did you forget that we decided to make Tianjin rice for dinner today? I know what's in your fridge better than you do, Amane-kun, so I keep track of what is being used. The eggs are disappearing far too quickly. It's not

good to use so many when we don't have any to spare. I would have appreciated it if you had at least told me beforehand—or even afterward. But it's a problem when the ingredients I planned to use suddenly go missing. I'm just glad I realized it at lunch."

"I'm sorry…"

She was absolutely right. Even though eggs had gotten cheaper recently, they were still higher than they used to be. They usually stocked up for the week whenever they happened to go on sale, but this time, Amane had caved to his hunger and used them up when there were no extras left. The next sale wasn't until the day after tomorrow, and since he'd eaten enough for two days in advance, it was no wonder Mahiru felt the need to scold him. Especially considering they split their grocery expenses evenly.

If he'd been paying for his own separate stash, Mahiru probably wouldn't have said a word apart from maybe chiding him for overeating. But in this case, the fault was entirely his.

"Goodness me… I plan our meals based on what's in the fridge, you know."

"I'm so sorry. I forgot to check how many we had left, and that's on me."

"And do you have any remorse for eating them?"

"The eggs yearned to be eaten."

"Amane-kun."

"I'm kidding, I'm sorry."

"Good grief…"

"I'll go replenish our stock right now. I'll sprint there if I have to."

"Before that, I will hereby disclose your punishment."

"Yes, ma'am."

"We will be buying some heavy things today, so you're carrying the bags. And before that, we're going clothes shopping, so the bags will be jam-packed."

Amane couldn't help but wonder, *Which part of that counts as punishment?*

His plan was to do the shopping alone, but Mahiru made it very clear that she wanted to tag along. And from the sound of it, she was planning to stop somewhere other than the supermarket first.

“So no different from what we usually do, then. Isn’t this just a date? You’re not actually mad, are you, Mahiru?”

“I’m *superduper* mad…*huff huff!*”

“*Superduper* mad, huh?”

“*Superduper* mad.”

Mahiru expressed her anger with an adorable pout, and all traces of anger on her face had vanished. It was obvious that she was never truly angry to begin with. Most likely, she’d only pretended to scold him so she could use it as an excuse to invite him out on a date.

“What can I do to earn your forgiveness?”

“…That hairstyle from the other day…”

“Getting a little too fond of it, aren’t you?”

The other day, with Chitose and Itsuki’s help, he’d gone on a date sporting a hairstyle different from his usual look. Mahiru had taken quite a liking to it, and ever since then, she’d occasionally make these little requests for him to style his hair that way again.

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who eats too many eggs just because they are good for you!”

“You’ve got me there… All right, give me a sec, okay? I’ll go fix my hair.”

“As soon as possible, please.”

“Understood, my lady.”

His original plan was to take it easy at home today, but it seemed that had changed to taking it easy outside instead.

Aware that he often made Mahiru feel lonely, Amane smiled quietly to himself.

I’ll welcome these adorably selfish demands of hers anytime, he thought, savoring her sweet display of affection as he headed back to his room to get ready.

Bookwalker SS

This Might Have Been a Perfect Strike

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 11.5 from the Bookwalker Japan

"You're still moving like a robot, Mahiru. Not used to my new look yet?"

After sprucing himself up with Chitose and Itsuki's help, Amane had gone to pick Mahiru up from her salon appointment and was glad to see that his makeover was a massive success. The only problem was that, for some reason, Mahiru had grown unusually stiff and fidgety.

They had been dating for nine months now, and they had become so close that it was a normal thing for her to be at Amane's place every day, only heading back to her own apartment when it was time for bed. Yet now, just holding his hand and walking close by him made Mahiru let out a strange, vibrating "Uuuu…" sound.

She'd been so cheerful and animated only moments ago, which left Amane utterly baffled by the sudden change.

"W-well, it's not that I'm not used to it, it's just…you look a little different from usual, and it's…um, kind of stimulating."

"Really? I'm actually wearing more layers than usual, you know?"

Why she called it *"stimulating"* was beyond him. Amane's outfit consisted entirely of clothes he already owned, just combined in a way he'd never tried before, and since he'd only changed his hairstyle a little and added some makeup, he hadn't expected such an intense reaction. Perhaps Chitose's skills had something to do with it, but Amane suspected that Mahiru was simply too vulnerable to such changes.

"Well, maybe you are, but…you just look so fresh and dazzling."

"That's just the Mahiru-eye filter putting sparkles all over me."

"I'm not lying… And it's not just me, either."

“What isn’t just you?”

“Look—people on the street keep sneaking glances at you.”

Amane did as she asked and glanced around. Now that she mentioned it, it did feel like more people than usual were looking his way. Still, it didn’t seem like those stares were directed at him so much as at the girl clinging to his arm.

After all, Mahiru had just come back from the salon. Her hair had been perfectly styled, and with her natural beauty and charm on full display, it was only natural that people’s eyes would be drawn to her instead.

“I’m pretty sure they’re looking at you because you’re pretty, Mahiru. Or maybe it’s because you’re being a little more assertive than usual?”

“…Well, when you look this dashing, I can’t risk losing you. Someone might try to talk to you.”

Although her words were but a timid mumble, Mahiru continued to cling to him as hard as she could, as if to declare to everyone that she would never hand him over. At this point, Amane thought that if someone actually had the guts to hit on him like this, they’d deserve a round of applause for their sheer courage.

“I’m not going to run off or anything, you know? We’re holding hands super tight, aren’t we?”

Mahiru might have been the one acting all clingy, but Amane had no plans to let go either. With their fingers firmly entwined, he stayed close by her side, unwilling to part from his beloved even for a moment. The stares from passersby were a little embarrassing, but since Mahiru was doing her best to subtly and adorably ward off anyone who might approach, it was only right for him, as her boyfriend, to meet her halfway.

“…I know what you’re like. You always try to fill your hands with shopping bags so you don’t have to hold mine.”

“Well, I can’t deny that… Make sure you squeeze tight then.”

“You won’t fix that habit by letting me carry something instead?”

“Nope.”

“Geez!”

Amane couldn’t bear the thought of making Mahiru carry more than she had to, so on this point, he refused to compromise.

Mahiru knew how stubborn he could be. She puffed out her cheeks to form an adorable pout, though her eyes sparkled with delight as she squeezed his arm even tighter to her body. Her voice carried only joy as she murmured, “That’s another bad habit of yours, Amane-kun.”

Amane answered with nothing more than a brief, amused chuckle.

Gamers SS

A Secret Bonus

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 11.5 from the Gamers Bookstore in Japan

“How did she like the album?”

It was the day after Mahiru had gotten Koyuki’s thoughts on the album. Chitose, guessing that it must have finally arrived at its destination, asked Mahiru that question in a wary tone.

“She was delighted with it. Though I have to admit, it was a little embarrassing.”

It sounded as though Koyuki was delighted to flip through the album, and she also looked relieved. It appeared that, just as Mahiru had suspected, Koyuki had been quite worried about her. Seeing for herself that Mahiru was getting along just fine put her heart at ease.

Mahiru was glad she could reassure her, but showing her the album had been rather embarrassing. There were all sorts of photos of her in there. Amane often grumbled about how awkward it was when his parents saw glimpses of his everyday life, and for the first time, Mahiru truly understood how he felt.

“Well, of course! It’s basically a compilation of your cutest moments.”

“…I’m happy you took such flattering photos of me.”

“Heh heh, well, naturally. These were photos meant for my best friend’s mom, after all—I had to give it my all.”

“…Thank you so much.”

Thanks to Chitose’s enthusiasm, Mahiru was able to be herself in front of the camera without getting nervous. She couldn’t thank Chitose and the others enough for that.

“Oh, don’t mention it… By the way, did Koyuki-san mention anything?”

“Anything…about what?”

“Well, you see, at the very end of the album, I may have slipped in a superduper adorable photo of you.”

“Chitose-san?!?!?!”

The revelation hit Mahiru like a bucket of cold water, and she instinctively stared at Chitose in shock. But with a carefree grin, she just waved her hand and playfully said, “Just kidding, just kidding! I snuck in a little letter instead.”

“…A letter?”

“Mm-hmm. A passionate one about just how unbelievably pretty our Mahirun is.”

“Hey?!?!?!”

“Do you think that’s a joke too?”

“…Knowing you, Chitose-san, if you actually wrote a letter, I’d say half of it might be that, but the other half would likely be something to put her mind at ease.”

Mahiru had no way of knowing if Chitose had tucked a letter inside or not.

But she knew her friend well. Chitose might fool around often, yet when it truly mattered, she never did. Mahiru knew just how kind and considerate she was to her friends at heart. If Chitose had included a letter, it was surely to reassure Koyuki that Mahiru was in a good place and that she didn’t have to worry anymore.

“You know me inside out, Mahirun. Oh, and don’t get mad—it was Amane-approved. He said he slipped in a letter too.”

“Honestly…”

She had wondered how Chitose managed to sneak a letter in, but if Amane had been an accomplice, it wasn’t hard to guess. He had helped her with the packaging, and so he would’ve had plenty of chances to sneak one in.

It was the first time Mahiru had heard about Amane writing a letter as well, so she made a mental note to ask him about it later. When she turned back to Chitose, she noticed her friend watching her with a somewhat cautious expression.

“Was it unwelcome?”

"…Of course not. Thank you. I love you, Chitose-san."

How could she find it unwelcome? Chitose had done it out of genuine care for her, and Amane hadn't stopped her. Besides, Koyuki had mentioned no complaints or concerns whatsoever. There was nothing for Mahiru to criticize.

All she could offer was words of gratitude.

Relieved, Chitose broke into a bright smile and threw herself at Mahiru to go in for an enthusiastic hug. Mahiru caught her friend's tackle with a smile of her own.

Melon Books SS

A Man of His Word

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 11.5 from the Melon Books Bookstore in Japan

"Oh look, the idiot just keeps coming back."

It had been a week since Mahiru and their friends had first paid a visit to Amane's workplace together. Ever since then, Itsuki had taken it upon himself to stop by whenever he knew Amane was working, his thought process being that since he'd been given permission once, it was fair game from then on.

Amane never outright told him not to come, but unlike Mahiru, who had been considerate enough to wait a while before visiting again, Itsuki strolled right in with a grin as if he owned the place. Needless to say, Amane could only hold his head in his hands.

Itsuki had his own part-time job, so Amane couldn't tell if he came here to blow off steam or just to mess with him. Either way, that trademark cheerful smirk of his was on full display as he sat at his table.

Itsuki had come alone today, so Amane had led him to a counter seat. But every time Itsuki caught sight of Amane working hard, he couldn't hold back his grin.

Miyamoto, who was on shift with him, cast them a knowing, almost pitying look as if to say, *"Oh boy, here we go again,"* and even took the initiative to handle extra tasks so Amane and Itsuki could chat. Still, Amane wished his senior wouldn't be so considerate in that regard. The more he talked with Itsuki, the harder it was for him to stay professional.

"Hey, come on, what's the problem? I'm a paying customer, aren't I?"

"Get lost."

"Aww, you're blushing."

"Get loster."

Amane only let that grumble slip because Itsuki was the only one at the counter. Realizing as much, Itsuki didn't interrupt and merely watched as Amane focused on making the coffee with a blank look on his face.

"…Still, you're working pretty hard, huh?"

"Duh. That's what you're meant to do at a job."

"Well, true enough… Oh, hey Shiina-san."

"What!?"

When Itsuki suddenly called Mahiru's name and looked toward the entrance, Amane reflexively followed his gaze—but there wasn't a soul in sight.

He turned back and found Itsuki grinning, lips twitching with amusement as he said, "Just kidding," utterly unrepentant.

Amane shot him a withering glare.

"Hey now, don't glare at your customer."

"Just wait till tomorrow."

"I'll go throw myself at Shiina-san for comfort."

"Don't you dare lay a hand on her."

"Ohh, someone's jealous? Relax, man—it was a figure of speech."

"I know. Still got on my nerves."

Taking advantage of the fact that no customers were within earshot, Amane muttered the last part in a gruff voice. Itsuki didn't let it get to him and just laughed.

As Miyamoto's distant "Welcome!" echoed through the café, Amane shot another sharp glance at Itsuki, who had yet to stop laughing.

"Man, your love for Shiina-san knows no limits."

"Keep talking and I'll make sure you never say another word again."

"Shiina-saaan, Amane's bullying me!"

"You won't fool me twice."

Amane turned away as Itsuki intentionally called out the name of his beloved girlfriend, who wasn't even present. But before he could roll his eyes, a cool voice drifted over from behind Itsuki. It sounded half-amused and half-exasperated.

"Whenever this happens, it's normally Akazawa-san who started it, isn't it?"

That was a voice Amane could never mistake. His head snapped toward it, and there Mahiru stood, unwinding her scarf as she walked gracefully toward him.

"Wh—huh? Wait, why are you here?" Amane stammered.

"…Was I not supposed to come? I just thought…maybe I'd drop by today."

"N-no, I'm not saying you can't, but—"

Amane had known that Mahiru might come to the café again, but he hadn't expected her to show up without saying a word to him beforehand, and his voice came out a pitch higher than intended.

"What a riot," Itsuki chuckled.

"Shut it. This is all your fault."

Itsuki must have known Mahiru would be coming to the café today. Amane glared him down, but as always, was met only with his easy smile.

Now that Mahiru had gently stepped in to mediate, Amane could say nothing more. He went to fetch her a menu, feeling a little frustrated.

Suruga-ya SS

Inside the Secret Bonuses

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 11.5 from the Suruga-ya Bookstore in Japan

Koyuki's eyes widened in shock when she noticed an envelope tucked into the final page of the photo album Mahiru had sent her.

There was nothing unusual about finding a letter inside. In fact, Mahiru had included one of her own with the album itself. But the envelope in her hands now contained a different letter. In fact, there were two such envelopes.

When she turned over the plain envelope, she found neat, orderly handwriting that read *Amane Fujimiya*. This, she expected. Since Amane and Mahiru had made the album together, it wouldn't be strange for him to send a letter as one of its creators. It was likely slipped in at the end without Mahiru's knowledge, meant as a surprise. Otherwise, it would have been put next to Mahiru's.

Then, what about the other one?

Koyuki flipped over the second envelope, a charming white one adorned with a mimosa flower pattern. Written neatly on the back was a name that had come up now and then in her conversations with Mahiru, and even appeared in the album itself: *Chitose Shirakawa*.

Mahiru probably knew nothing about this one either.

Letters from two people—one the man Mahiru loved, and the other, most likely, her closest friend.

"Looks like Mahiru-san is getting plenty of love."

Koyuki couldn't know what the letters said without opening them, but even so, she could feel the affection and trust the two held for Mahiru radiating from them. In this day and age, they had taken the time to write by hand, carefully and neatly, just to send them to her. A small smile tugged

at Koyuki's lips at the final surprise they had in store for her.

Her request had been born out of concern for Mahiru, yet as she looked through the album, she realized that worry had been entirely misplaced. Mahiru had found where she belonged—and even found the one she loved most.

Koyuki carefully opened the envelope and read over the letter inside. It began with a proper seasonal greeting and was written with a serious tone, yet it conveyed Amane's genuine love for Mahiru, a thoughtful regard for Koyuki, and words meant to reassure her about how things were going.

Though Koyuki had never met him in person, his sincerity came through so plainly that she could tell what kind of man he was even from their brief exchange.

Mahiru-san's choice of partner, she thought again, *was without a doubt the right one.*

The second letter, in contrast, was much more casual. It began with a cheerful self-introduction, then went on to describe how lively Mahiru had been, how well she got along with Amane, and how happily she spent her days.

The round, bubbly, and spirited handwriting spoke of a merry, kindhearted girl who truly cared for her friends, and naturally smiled as she read it.

I'm so glad Mahiru-san has found so many people she can truly open her heart to.

Mahiru, who had once struggled to trust others, was now taking photos with friends and even making an album with them. That alone showed how much she'd come to trust the people around her. Koyuki could easily sense Chitose's warmth and kindness from her letter.

In the end, both Amane and Chitose cared deeply for Mahiru. They had likely included these letters not only to ease the worries of the woman Mahiru so dearly looked up to, but also to convey their adoration for her.

"I couldn't be more glad," she murmured.

There was someone who loved Mahiru, and someone Mahiru could wholeheartedly love back. Just knowing that was enough for her. Any worries she'd had about Mahiru's relationships were now gone.

If she had one concern left, it would be Mahiru's parents—but that was something far beyond what Koyuki had the power to change.

If anything ever happens… I'll be counting on you, Fujimiya-san.

Koyuki was certain he would support Mahiru on his own without needing to be told, yet all she could do from afar was pray for their peace. Ideally, Mahiru would never have to face any trouble at all—but if she did, Koyuki could only trust Amane to be there for her.

I hope nothing does happen… Koyuki wished.

She held the letters and the album close to her chest, comforted by the thought that Mahiru had, at last, found happiness.

Toranoana SS

You Can't Just Pretend Everything is Fine

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 115 from the Toranoana Bookstore in Japan

"By the way, earlier," Yuuta began, "you said you had a fight with Shirakawa-san?"

After the Itsuki, Yuuta, and Amane trio had gone to karaoke, Amane left early, while Yuuta and Itsuki stopped by a café together.

There, Yuuta decided to ask about the argument between Itsuki and Chitose, something he hadn't gotten the full story on. Amane hadn't gone into detail, but judging from how he described it, Itsuki seemed to be the root cause.

Itsuki made a remarkably sour face. "It wasn't so much a fight as it was me making a mistake. Anyway, Chi snapped at me."

"Did you make her cry?"

"…Yeah. I did."

"Then it's on you, Itsuki."

"I know… I really do regret it."

Yuuta knew Chitose well enough from their middle school club days to understand that she had a strong mental spirit. She would never cry over something trivial.

Back then, whether during the time when she showed little interest in others and devoted herself solely to running, or later when she'd transformed into someone cheerful and radiant, one thing had never changed—Chitose never cried. Even when faced with unreasonable hardships, she endured them with unwavering strength. Yuuta knew that better than anyone.

So if Chitose cried, then it was most certainly Itsuki's fault.

“Itsuki, you’ve always been one who loves to hide things. You’ve got this weird sense of pride that makes you think showing weakness is something to be ashamed of.”

“Weird sense of pride?”

“I’m not wrong, am I? You’ve been that way since we were kids. Even when you got hurt, you’d grit your teeth and pretend everything was fine, then bawl your eyes out when no one was around, remember?”

“Why the hell do you remember dumb stuff like that…?”

“Please. We’ve spent enough time together for that stuff to stick.”

“Don’t tell Amane about this, all right?”

“Hmm… What do I do…?”

“Uh, Yuuta-kun?”

“If you promise never to make Shirakawa-san cry again, I’ll consider it.”

“…Wait, are you mad at me?”

“Did you forget how *insanely* stressed out I was back then?”

Yuuta still remembered it clearly. Back in those days, he’d been close with both Itsuki and Chitose, and since they’d been in the same club, he’d been right in the middle of that whole mess when their senior had screwed up. The entire ordeal had been a nightmare for him. Chitose ended up injured and had to quit, Itsuki fell into a slump, club activities were suspended for a while, and everyone had to sit through one-to-one interviews as part of an internal investigation. It had turned into quite the scandal.

“I even remember going to visit you at home, you know. And I had to run all over the place clearing up those ridiculous rumors people were spreading about you two.”

“Ugh…yeah, I still feel sorry for all the trouble I caused you…”

“Well, it wasn’t your fault anyway—it was that senior’s. Still…I was genuinely worried, you know? And then on top of all that, you suddenly kept changing how you acted, so yeah, you had me pretty anxious.”

“That was…”

“Well, I get it. You needed to protect your heart back then, so I’m not gonna fault you for it.”

Itsuki hadn’t always been such a humorous free spirit. Before meeting

Chitose, he'd been a rather quiet boy, one who dutifully listened to his parents and fit neatly into the mold of what adults would call an ideal child.

That all changed after he met Chitose.

His transformation was not one adults approved of, but as his friend, Yuuta had been glad to see it. The gloomy, depressed Itsuki had finally started to act like someone freed from his own restraints.

"You are happy now, aren't you?"

"Of course I am."

"Then that's all that matters. Just…make sure you always confide in Shirakawa-san, okay? That's all I've got to say."

The one thing that hadn't changed about Itsuki was how he kept everything bottled up, and that habit presumably triggered their argument. Chitose couldn't stand that side of him, and so it was no wonder they had clashed. Hopefully, this argument would serve as a lesson that would help them avoid needless fights in the future.

Itsuki's eyes widened for a moment, then a smile formed on his face as he laughed sheepishly. "I'm not gonna run away or dodge things anymore. Well, unless I get the chance to hole up at the café where Amane works, then I'm snatching it."

"Fujimiya's gonna chew you out for that."

"His anger comes from a place of love…"

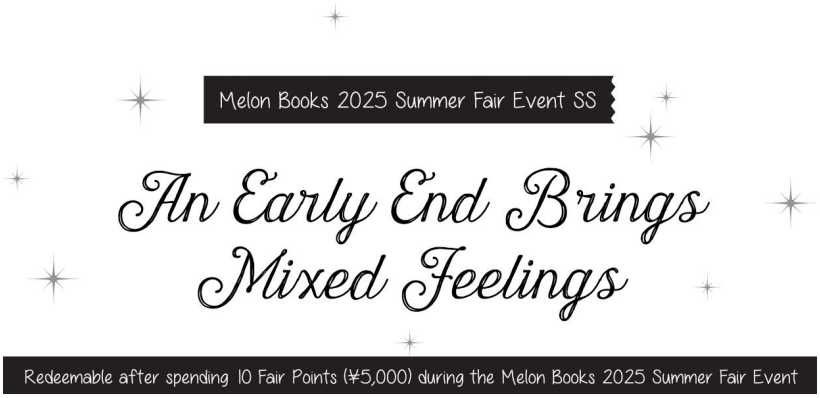
"Keep telling yourself that."

"Why are you being so awful!?!?"

"You always laugh things off and act like everything's fine, that's why," Yuuta answered before adding, "That bad habit of yours caused all this."

And Itsuki couldn't even argue. Realizing he'd hit the nail on the head, Itsuki pursed his lips with a frustrated *"Grrr."*

Yuuta laughed, then smacked his friend hard on the back.



After the news program announced that the rainy season had ended in the Kanto region, Amane and Mahiru exchanged a glance and shrugged.

"They call that a rainy season?" he asked.

"Right? It feels as though it never even happened," Mahiru returned.

Amane listened to the newscaster explain how many days shorter it had been compared to previous years and laughed crookedly.

Even after the season officially began, there hadn't been many rainy days. Maybe there were the occasional bursts of sudden downpour, but none of those long, steady drizzles that lasted for days. So while it wasn't exactly surprising, Amane couldn't help but feel a little bewildered that it was already over.

Personally, he had never been too fond of the rainy season. It was too damp and humid, making it harder to go jogging. Yet, despite that, he didn't really dislike it either. There was something oddly soothing about the smell of rain and the change of scenery it brought.

"We got fewer rainy days than I expected," Mahiru remarked. "I suppose that's not exactly good news for farmers or the reservoirs."

"Yeah… I wonder if the dam's water level's gonna be okay this year."

"I checked the numbers earlier, and it looked fine for now," she replied. "If it weren't, we would be praying hard for a rain blessing."

"Yeah, it would really impact how we live."

If Itsuki or their other friends overheard them, they would likely make fun of them by saying, *"What high schoolers talk about this stuff?"* But to Amane and Mahiru, that didn't matter. They genuinely cherished these

everyday conversations, even if they weren't sweet or romantic.

They were conversations that only two people sharing a life together could have.

Amane glanced out the window to be greeted by a sky so brilliantly clear that it seemed to insist the rainy season was truly over. If he were to open the window now, the air, which was already hot despite July having just begun, would rush in and smother them in its sweltering embrace.

"To be honest, I can't complain about the humidity being gone so soon," he said. "Rainy days are nice, but after a while, it's just a pain. Laundry doesn't dry, and shopping gets annoying."

The laundry problem was no small matter, and while the end of the season was welcome in that sense, it also marked the earnest arrival of summer. He couldn't decide whether to celebrate or sigh about it. For him, it was about fifty-fifty. But when he looked over at Mahiru, she wore an expression that was…pensive, almost troubled, as though she had something on her mind.

"Hmm…"

"What's up?"

"…Well, it's just that…the rainy season's over now, isn't it?"

"That it is."

It had been so brief that Amane wondered if it might have been the shortest one yet, and the rain itself had been scarce. Still, short or not, the rainy season was already over.

"Didn't the forecast say it should be sunny for at least a week?"

"Yeah. The screen was just a line of sun icons. What about it?"

The way she said it almost made it sound like she wanted the rainy season to last longer. And judging by the wistful, faintly downcast look on Mahiru's face, that might not have been far from the truth.

"…Actually, I bought some really cute rainwear this year—an umbrella and rain shoes with such adorable designs. But I never got the chance to use them. I was hoping to take them out when we went on a date, Amane-kun," Mahiru admitted. Then, sounding disappointed, she muttered, "I went through all that trouble picking such pretty ones, too…"

Her little pout as she said it was painfully adorable.

“So, if I’m not mistaken… You wanted to show them off to me?”

“…That’s right. I, um…wanted you to see me wear something pretty and—well, maybe praise me a little for it. N-not that I was trying to pressure you to or anything! It’s just…the designs are my favorite, so I wanted you to see them.”

That she modestly held back her own feelings here was one of Mahiru’s adorable qualities.

The way she flustered and fidgeted was so irresistibly endearing that it brought a smile to Amane’s face. Had she just honestly asked him to praise her, he would have been more than happy to shower her with compliments, but even in moments like this, Mahiru was more modest than forward.

Unable to contain himself, Amane covered his mouth with his hand to hide the grin tugging at his lips, but Mahiru noticed anyway and puffed out her cheeks.

“Please don’t laugh at me,” she huffed. Even her sulking face looked adorable to Amane. Maybe he was completely beyond saving.

“Hmph!” Mahiru pouted and promptly began to thump his thighs lightly. Amane reached out and gently stroked her puffed-up cheeks to settle her down.

“How about you show me the next time it rains? That should work, right? Or you could even try them on right now. I’ll compliment you lots and lots.”

“L-lots and lots might be a little bit too many…”

“How come? Don’t worry, I only say what I really think. No flattery.”

“That is exactly the problem!”

Amane never hesitated to praise her when he meant it, and if Mahiru ever wanted it, he’d gladly do so as much as she liked. But from her point of view, that wholehearted honesty of his seemed to be a little too much to handle.

“Then should I not compliment you at all?”

“…I wouldn’t like that either. I know I’m being selfish, but…do it in moderation, please! Just the right amount!”

Amane nodded at Mahiru, her insistence making him smile.

“Got it. I’ll keep it moderate, then.”

“You say that, but I know you’ll praise me lots only to later claim that was your idea of *moderate*.”

“You know me too well.”

“Geez!”

Lately, Mahiru had either gotten sharper or had simply learned to read Amane’s habits a little too well—she always managed to beat him to the punch with her comebacks. Still, that wasn’t going to stop him from doing what he intended.

As she started lightly smacking his thigh again with her fists, Amane couldn’t help but find her utterly lovable. He chuckled and slipped an arm around her to pull her close.

“Or would you rather I start complimenting you right now?” he murmured near her ear.

The moment he said it, Mahiru turned completely still and silent. Watching her reaction, Amane let loose a mischievous smile as radiant as the clear sky outside and gave serious thought to where he should start his praise.

Afterword

Author's Message

Did you enjoy Volume 11.5 of *The Angel Next Door?*

This book marks the third side story collection in the series.

I imagine some of you might be thinking, *"What? A side story volume right after that cliffhanger in Volume 11?"* and on that point, I can only apologize. Still, I really wanted to release a side story volume before the story moves into the next school year...

For the side story volumes, I allow myself the freedom to write from the perspectives other than Amane-kun's. Because of that, this volume features a few events that even he never knew about. There are plenty of stories that can only be written if they aren't from his perspective.

Also, I only wrote ***Operation: Amane's Big Makeover*** after seeing an illustration Hanekoto-sensei made and thinking, *"Oh, I've gotta write this...!"* I ended up finishing it in just two days, *eheh heh*.

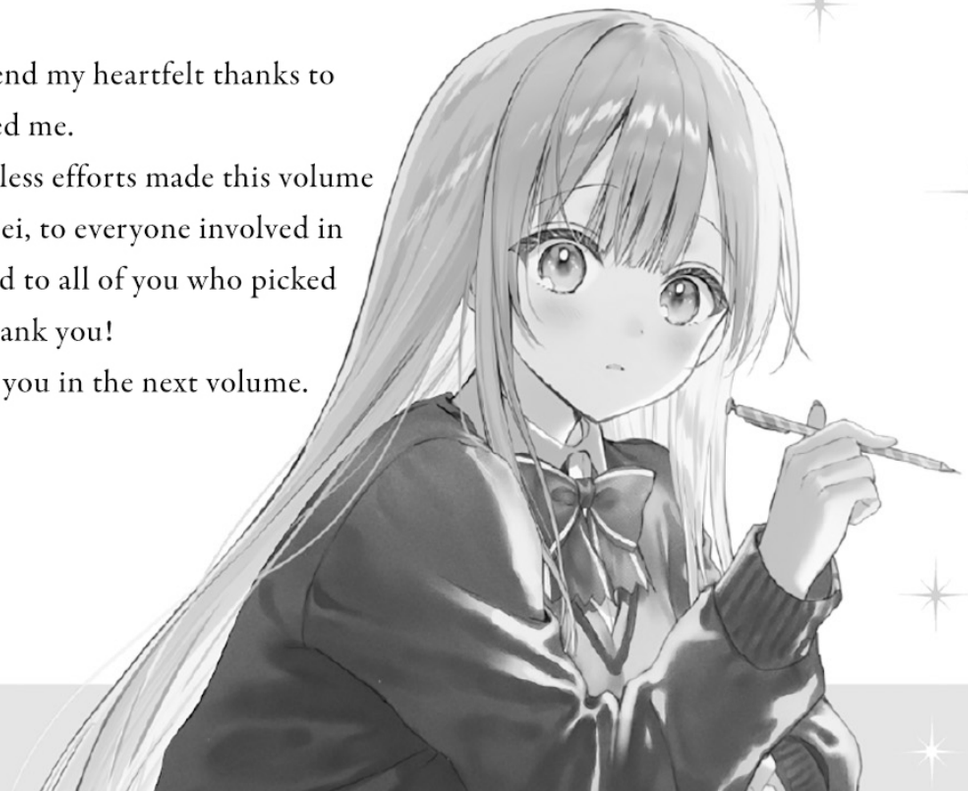
As for Sayo, the plan is to introduce her story gradually within the main volumes.

Hanekoto-sensei has once again graced this volume with some absolutely adorable illustrations! She has hidden angel wings somewhere on the cover this time as well, and it's become something I look forward to finding with every new cover! This time, she also added Mr. Bear and some coffee, which I was so happy to see.

Finally, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has supported me.

To my editor, whose tireless efforts made this volume possible, to Hanekoto-sensei, to everyone involved in the publication process, and to all of you who picked up this book—sincerely, thank you!

I look forward to seeing you in the next volume.



Saeki-san

Afterword

Translator's Message

I hope you enjoyed! Indi writing.

Firstly, thanks so much for reading our translation! I love the side story volumes, so I hope you had as much fun reading this one as I had translating it!

We'd expected to see some Itsuki & Chitose moments this volume, but I definitely was not expecting a chapter about how Itsuki envied Amane. Such a good chapter.

As always, it's so heartwarming to read about Mahiru's relationship with Koyuki, and I love how Koyuki has been a key focus of all the side story volumes so far. It would be amazing if we got a spin-off volume dedicated solely to Mahiru's childhood—or even one about Itsuki & Chitose in middle school. Both would be awesome.

Saekisan has actually posted some info about Volume 12 on her Twitter (*@saeki_narou*). As one would expect after the final chapters of Volumes 11 and 11.5, it will focus mainly on Mahiru's family circumstances.

I would like to thank ***JHgamer*** for sending the ***Melon Books*** bookstore short story, and another kind discord member for sending images of the ***Gamers***, ***Suruga-ya***, and ***Toranoana*** bookstore short stories!

I would also like to give big thanks to ***Tipsy***, ***KBlade***, ***Strata***, and everyone who notified me of any wonky phrasing for proofreading the translation, and to ***Zel*** for his accuracy checking!

If you enjoyed our translation, please consider sending us a heartfelt message over at ***discord.gg/otonari***. And once again, thanks so much for reading our translation! *Vol. 11.5 final word count: 71,024.*

Don't forget to support the series when you can!

Consider buying the official translation by ***Yen Press*** once you are able to!

I hope you will continue to enjoy this series!

NextDoorTL